

Using Your Head for Championship Performance in **Track and Field**

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*A Track and Field Athlete's Workbook
for Developing Mental Toughness*

By Dr. Alan Goldberg



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Introduction

In every sport at the highest levels, the very best athletes always say the same things when asked about the secrets to their success. They tell you that you have to develop good mechanics and proper technique. You have to have a solid tactical and/or strategic understanding of your event(s). You have to develop and maintain a superior level of physical strength and conditioning. Lastly, and surely not least, you have to have your head on straight at crunch time. What this last secret is all about is that if you want to take your God-given and hard-work-developed athletic abilities as far as possible, if you want to compete at the next level, then you can't do it by simply just training the physical dimension of your event. You also have to systematically train mentally. You have to develop mental toughness.

Let me put it in simple terms: Do you really want to compete at your potential? Do you want to run, throw and/or jump the very best that you're capable of? Do you have some big, scary dreams that you would desperately like to achieve? If so, then your success in this endeavor is at least 95% physical and 5% mental in practice. Simply put, there is no substitute for hard work and perseverance in the pursuit of your dreams. You have to pay your "physical dues" in practice. There is no physical shortcut to becoming a champion. NONE!

However, once you step onto the track or field for an event, once the pressure of competition is turned way up high at a critically important meet, once you have to perform in front of college or Olympic coaches, then success in your events is now 95% mental and 5 % physical. What this means is also very simple. When it comes time for that big meet, whether you compete your best or stink the place out depends almost entirely upon what is going on between your ears! Simply

put, what you think about or focus on right before the race or event's start will determine whether you soar with the eagles or gobble off-key with the turkeys!

To become a champion you must train like one. You have to be willing to do whatever it takes physically to get yourself to the next level. There is absolutely no substitute for consistent, honest, hard work. Hanging around in front of the tube spilling snacks and soda on your face won't get you there. Cutting corners in your training and consistently dogging it when the coach isn't looking won't get you to the next level either. You'll never reach your dreams with that kind of training behavior. Success can only become yours when your investment of physical training in practice is consistently solid.

However, once you get into a pressured meet or prestigious invitational, the physical side of your sport becomes much less important. Why? Because at crunch time, the physical side of your sport is now in the rear view mirror. It's in the PAST and you either did it or didn't! In the starting blocks or as you get ready for your first jump or throw, your performance is NOW 95% mental. Your focus of concentration, ability to handle pressure, "reboundability" from a bad throw, jump or event, your ability to handle last minute negative thinking and self-doubts, your self-confidence and mental toughness will all determine whether your hard work, consistent training and athletic skills will pay off in a well executed race, jump or throw. In other words, without having a "good head" on your shoulders, you'll consistently fall short of your goals.

All too often, track and field competitors will do what's necessary in order to improve and get stronger and faster. They'll religiously work with a trainer-coach, practice long hours perfecting their event, whether it be the 200 meter sprint, a middle distance run, the long jump or pole vault, study the events intricacies, and build up their endurance through sprints and distance running. In practice their hard work is clearly visible. They handle the drills well and compete strong. By meet time they are physically tough and ready. However, to compete your best when it counts the most, you need more than just this physical preparedness. You also need to be ready mentally. You need to be **MENTALLY TOUGH AT MEET TIME!**

If you go into your big event HOPING that you'll perform your best, HOPING that you'll run fast, clear 12 feet or achieve a personal best or HOPING that you don't embarrass yourself, then you're setting yourself up for some major heartache and disappointment. If you go into a big meet worried about a specific competitor, dwelling on a previous bad performance, distracted by a poor warm-up or just plain doubting yourself, then you will never perform to your potential. Do NOT waste all of your hard physical work and training! Do NOT leave your mental toughness to chance. No serious track and field athlete would ever leave his/her physical training and conditioning to chance. That would be totally foolhardy. So why leave such an important component, the mental dimension of your event(s) out of the equation? Since your focus of concentration and ability to stay relaxed under pressure are absolute keys to competing well, why would you then go into a big meet too nervous and focused on all of the wrong things? Well, you wouldn't if you had trained properly! To compete like a champion you must systematically develop the mind of a champion. This workbook is designed to help you do just that: TO THINK AND PERFORM LIKE A WINNER ON THE DAY OF THAT IMPORTANT MEET!

The techniques, strategies and exercises found in this workbook are GUARANTEED to help you: Stay calm under pressure; Concentrate like a winner; Avoid psych-outs and intimidation; Block out distractions; Quickly leave bad races, run-throughs, poor jumps or sub-par throws behind you; Feel confident; Believe in yourself; Master last minute negative thinking and self-doubts and much more! If you WORK these techniques and DO this workbook, then I can confidently guarantee that you will significantly strengthen your level of mental toughness. If you simply read through this book once, like you would any other book, then you will find what you read to be relatively useless in the long run! Why? Simply because this is a WORKbook, NOT a READbook. I know all the techniques and strategies that you'll find within these pages work. I've borrowed them from elite athletes in and out of track and field through the years. However, in order for you to get them to consistently work for you, in order for you to truly build the skills of mental toughness, you must consistently work them!

SO HOW TOUGH ARE YOU?

Testing your current level of mental toughness

So let's begin in the beginning with exactly where you are at mentally. Are you a mental toughness giant, or a 98 lb., mental toughness weakling? Let's find out. Take this very simple, mental toughness questionnaire to determine exactly where your mental strengths and weaknesses lie. Having an awareness of your present strengths, and, more important, your weaknesses is the very first important step to developing the mind of a champion. After completing your mental toughness training in this workbook, I would then recommend that you retake this same questionnaire. This will demonstrate how far you've come mentally and what other work is still needed.



A Track and Field Athlete's Mental Toughness Questionnaire
Handling pressure

(true/false answers)

- ___ 1. I often dread participating in highly competitive meets.
- ___ 2. I think about my opponent's size, skills and/or reputation before I perform.
- ___ 3. Away meets, weather and field conditions, crowd size and specific opponents usually affect my performance negatively
- ___ 4. I look forward to the more competitive invitationals
- ___ 5. The tougher the competition, the better my opponent, the happier I am
- ___ 6. I am inwardly calm and composed before I compete in my event
- ___ 7. I worry a lot about others out-placing or embarrassing me
- ___ 8. I frequently have better times/longer throws/higher jumps in practice than I do in meets situations
- ___ 9. I have the ability to calm myself when I'm too nervous
- ___ 10. I get physically sick before certain meets/competitions
- ___ 11. My pre-event self-talk is mostly negative and full of doubts
- ___ 12. I have trouble trusting my training and skills when it comes time to put it all on the line
- ___ 13. I place better against weaker opponents
- ___ 14. Some people would call me a "head case"
- ___ 15. I want to be the one taking the "baton on the final leg"
- ___ 16. More often than not I'm too nervous to compete to my potential
- ___ 17. I seem to place lower than other athletes who I know I'm better than

- ___ 18. I frequently get sick or injured right before bigger meets
- ___ 19. I'd much rather train/practice than compete
- ___ 20. "Choking" under pressure is a close friend of mine
- ___ 21. I tend to perform better in pre-season competitions rather than more important meets during the season
- ___ 22. I can never seem to make my hard work and extra training pay off

Concentration

- ___ 23. I am easily distracted
- ___ 24. I often focus on other athletes before the start of my event
- ___ 25. I often think about past poor performances before I run/jump/throw
- ___ 26. Once the race/event begins, I tend to focus too much on everyone else
- ___ 27. I think too much when I run/throw/jump
- ___ 28. I have the ability to block out negatives & doubts before the meet
- ___ 29. I usually only focus on one or two things when I compete
- ___ 30. I tend to compare myself with my opponents before and during my event
- ___ 31. I worry a lot about letting others down
- ___ 32. I can easily lock my focus on my event before I compete
- ___ 33. My mind has a tendency to drift too much before a meet/event
- ___ 34. I focus a lot on the outcome before and during the meet/event
- ___ 35. If I have a bad warm up, I can't seem to compete well
- ___ 36. I mentally jump ahead of myself during my event and entertain the "what if's"

- ___ 37. There are certain opponents/teams that I can't seem to be at my best whenever I compete against them.
- ___ 38. I tend to get distracted by what others say or do before and during the meet
- ___ 39. When I lose my focus, I can quickly bring it back
- ___ 40. When I compete, I mostly don't think

Handling Adversity (Mental Rebounding)

- ___ 41. I can't seem to shake the disappointment of a bad performance
- ___ 42. There are certain teams I compete against each year where I always perform poorly
- ___ 43. If my first pole vault/jump/throw/race is bad, the rest of my attempts are bad
- ___ 44. I usually believe that a bad warm-up will negatively affect my event(s)
- ___ 45. If I make a mistake, it stays with me a long time
- ___ 46. Disappointments and failures motivate me to work harder
- ___ 47. I have the ability to quickly let go of my mistakes/miscues
- ___ 48. When I get called for a foot foul/false start, I can't stop thinking about it
- ___ 49. When things go against me, they stick to me like glue
- ___ 50. I believe that I learn much more from my failures than successes
- ___ 51. Injuries make me want to pack it all up and quit
- ___ 52. If I have several bad jumps/throws/races in a row, I get discouraged
- ___ 53. Losses and setbacks make me feel like I'll never succeed
- ___ 54. With all my failures, I often question why I keep competing

- ___ 55. I deliberately use the memory of bad meets to push myself harder in practice on a daily basis
- ___ 56. When the going gets tough, I tend to quit
- ___ 57. After a failure, I look for what I can do better next time
- ___ 58. When bad things happen, I always think, "why me?"

- ___ 59. If I've been beaten by certain opponents a few times before, I tend to give up too easily when I compete against them again
- ___ 60. When I fail, there are usually correctable reasons for it.

Winning attitude

- ___ 61. I tend to see the glass of milk as always "half full"
- ___ 62. I believe that I can do anything that I set my mind to
- ___ 63. I build my successes on my failures
- ___ 64. Other's negativity always seems to get to me
- ___ 65. When I perform badly, I tend to make excuses
- ___ 66. I hate running/performing on certain tracks and against certain teams
- ___ 67. The more of my teammates I can inspire to compete harder, the better I feel
- ___ 68. I love being pushed by my coach
- ___ 69. It really annoys me when my teammates push me harder in practice
- ___ 70. I like to pace myself through a long practice so I don't get too tired
- ___ 71. It really bothers me when I see my teammates cut corners
- ___ 72. My coach would call me a whiner

- ___ 73. When I compete badly at big meets, it's usually my teammates' or coach's fault
- ___ 74. "Can't" and "never" aren't words in my vocabulary
- ___ 75. If I can't be the star, there's no point in trying hard
- ___ 76. I have an easy time finding things to complain about
- ___ 77. I am a positive person
- ___ 78. I tend to get threatened by other's successes
- ___ 79. I live, "when the going gets tough, the tough get going"
- ___ 80. If you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything

Scoring: Score one point for each answer that matches the answer on this scoring key.
If your answer doesn't match, assign a value of zero.



Handling pressure	Conc.	<i>Key</i> Handling adversity	Winning attitude
1. F	23. F	41. F	61. T
2. F	24. F	42. F	62. T
3. F	25. F	43. F	63. T
4. T	26. F	44. F	64. F
5. T	27. F	45. F	65. F
6. T	28. T	46. T	66. F
7. F	29. T	47. T	67. T
8. F	30. F	48. F	68. T
9. T	31. F	49. F	69. F
10. F	32. T	50. T	70. F
11. F	33. F	51. F	71. T
12. F	34. F	52. F	72. F
13. F	35. F	53. F	73. F
14. F	36. F	54. F	74. T
15. T	37. F	55. T	75. F
16. F	38. F	56. F	76. F
17. F	39. T	57. T	77. T
18. F	40. T	58. F	78. F
19. F		59. F	79. T
20. F		60. T	80. T
21. F			
22. F			



Scoring

Mental Toughness Questionnaire

There are a total of 80 possible points that you can get on this little test. If you answer these questions honestly and score between 72-80, then you are mentally tough as nails and should be traveling around the country with me conducting mental toughness workshops. If you score between 64- 71, then you are pretty solid mentally. Scores between 56-63 indicate that you are weak mentally and scores below 55 suggest that your head is definitely getting in the way of your performance.

Examine your answers in each of the four categories listed for directions into which area of mental toughness training you need to work on improving. For example, if you score 14 out of a possible 20 on the “handling pressure” section, it would be very useful for you to spend more time on these techniques in this workbook. Keep in mind that no matter what your score, you can always strengthen your mental toughness muscles and that’s what this training program is all about.

step 1

Getting started

Developing Awareness

In order for you to learn to do your best when it counts the most you must first develop AWARENESS of what you are currently doing mentally that may very well be getting in your way. You can't correct mental mistakes and strengthen weaknesses without knowing exactly what these are! You started this process of developing awareness by taking the Mental Toughness Questionnaire. Hopefully this has given you some general ideas of what may be getting you into hot water, performance-wise. Now let's get a bit more specific. Remember, without an awareness of your mental mistakes, you'll never be able to begin to build mental toughness. *Awareness is always your very first key to change.*

There are three basic areas that you need to develop an awareness of in order to systematically build mental toughness:

Self-talk or what I call your "Inner Coach"

Focus of Concentration

Level of Pre-meet/pre-event Nervousness or Excitement

Developing an awareness of your "inner coach"

"Meets/events are won and lost before the start and definitely before the finish."

Dr. G

Do you know what this statement means? Your pre-meet/event and during meet thoughts or self-talk, that is, the dialogue of what I call your "inner coach"

dramatically affects how loose and relaxed you are, your ability to focus on what's important and let go of everything else, your level of self-confidence and ultimately how well you perform. The wrong kind of "inner coaching" will tighten you up, undercut your confidence, distract you from the important task at hand and wreck your performance! So let's discover just what kind of "inner coach" you have working for you.

Discovering the difference between your good & bad performances

Exercise:

Part 1

"The Inner Coaching of Bad Performances."

Sit down, close your eyes and mentally review, in as much detail as possible a previous bad performance. Remember where the meet was held, who your competition was, the specific event you competed in, who you were up against, the crowd, the kind of day it was, etc. Specifically I would like you to "zoom in" on what you were thinking to yourself as you were warming up, right before your event and as you began. What kind of "inner coaching" was going on? Next, recall what you were thinking about during your event. For example, what went through your mind as you set up for the long jump, before your final try at a particular height, if you got called for a foot foul, right before the start of your race or before the handoff in the relay. What did you think when you heard the coach giving you feedback, had your opponent beat you or otherwise messed up? If you didn't place, how did you handle it? If an opponent was deliberately trying to intimidate you, what "inner coaching" went on? Take a moment right now to jot down in as much detail as possible the answers to the questions on Worksheet #1 "Self-talk & Bad performances." When you've finished, answer the very same questions for at least two more bad performances.

Now, compare your answers and see if you can discover a pattern between all of your bad outings. Usually you'll find that right before and/or during your event in a bad performance you tend to think very similar kinds of things. Your "inner coaching" is frequently negative, confidence-eroding and non-stop. Oftentimes it

fills you with dread and raises your anxiety level, making it all but impossible to remain loose and relaxed.

Purpose: Examining several of your bad performances in this way will help you come to “know” your bad inner coach. Remember, before you can change negative “inner coaching” to positive, you must first become aware of your typical patterns of negativity. Once you get a handle on what you typically say to yourself both before and during your bad outings, you will then be in a much better position to begin to turn this negative coaching around. However, if you have no awareness of the specific ways that you’re being negative, then you will continue to bring yourself down without any chance for change.

Part 2

“The Inner Coaching of Good Performances”

Next, pick several of your best performances, times when you were extremely satisfied with how well you performed. Examining them one at a time, vividly review each great performance in relation to your “inner coaching.” What were you thinking about before your event? What were you thinking about during warm-up? At the start? What kind of thoughts or self-talk, if any, did you have during your events? When things got tough or stressful for you, what did you think? If someone tried to intimidate you, how did you handle it? Write down all of your typical “inner coaching” for each of these good performances and record them on Worksheet #2 “Self-talk & Good Performances.” Next, compare all three or four of these good performances to see if there is a pattern of “inner coaching” that accompanies your best performances. If you’re anything like most track and field athletes out there, then you should be able to discover a pattern here.

Part 3

“Compare and Contrast”

Finally, take all of your self-talk worksheets, #'s 1 and #2 and carefully compare them. You should begin to see a significant difference in your “inner coaching” when you examine the differences between all of your good and bad performances.

What does this difference really mean?

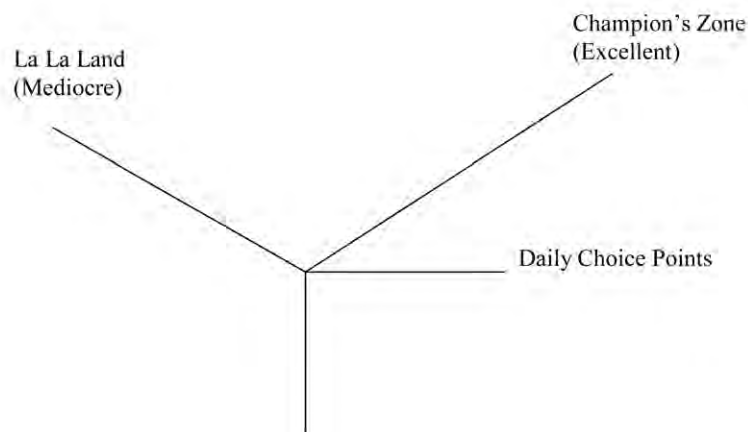
Your awareness of the differences in self-talk between your best and worst performances forms a critical first step in you being able to “retrain” your “inner coach.” For example, if you know the typical self-talk that always seems to accompany failure, as well as the self-talk that goes with success, then you are in a position to begin to turn the negative around before it leads to another bad performance. Let’s say that after a particularly slow time or poor showing you hear things like, “That was just terrible! Boy do you suck. You can NEVER compete well against these guys. You don’t even deserve to be on the same track with them!” Letting this kind of negative self-talk run uninterrupted in your head will very quickly undermine your confidence, raise your stress level and completely destroy your overall performance. This is why it is so critical that you immediately become aware of when your inner coaching turns negative like this so that you can take some constructive steps to turn it around. Without this awareness, you are doomed to continue to sabotage yourself into performing poorly.



step2

Motivation: Taking your performance to the next level

So how badly do you want it? Do you really want to be able to compete at a higher level? Are you doing everything possible in your training towards this end or are you inadvertently sabotaging yourself and holding yourself back? In other words, what is the **QUALITY** of your training like? What kind of an investment are you making in your athletic future on a daily basis? Are you “depositing” gold bullion whenever you train or are you chocking up a whole bunch of wooden nickels and Monopoly money? Your future success is almost completely in your hands and depends upon **HOW** you train.



Let's start with a very basic question: ***“Do you know what road you're on?”*** You see, every day when you train, you're on a road just like the one depicted in Figure #1. Everyday that road of yours forks many, many times. And, as an athlete, you have a decision to make many, many times a day. What fork am I going to

take? All too often athletes make this decision over and over again and have absolutely no awareness of which road they are choosing. As a result, they end up making choices that might NOT be in their best interests, choices that might not help them get to their goals.

Let's look at Fig. #1 more closely. There are basically two different paths that you can follow in relation to your sport as well as your life. When you take the left fork enough times, you will end up in a wondrous place I call "La La Land." What La La Land will get you in both your sport and life is "supreme mediocrity." In other words, you will become unbelievably average in everything that you do! When you consistently take the right fork, you will ultimately find yourself in "The Champions' Zone." The Champion's Zone is a place where you continuously achieve personal excellence! What do each of these paths actually look like?

For example, let's say that you're in the middle of a practice, feeling really tired and the coach wants you to do a drill to practice a technical part of your event, i.e. your approach, plant, start or something in your throw. As the drills begin, you notice that the coach turns away to attend to another teammate and so he/she isn't really watching you anymore. You think to yourself, "I'm whipped! This is boring! Time to chill," and then you deliberately space out and only do a fraction of what you should be doing had you been properly concentrating. When you do this, you have just made a conscious decision (whether you know it or not!) to take the left fork, the one to La La Land!

Or perhaps you know that your start off the blocks isn't as strong as you would like it to be and you know you should be spending more time practicing this weakness. (***A chain is only as strong as its' weakest link!***) However, it's no fun to practice things that you're not very good at, so you either work on it half-heartedly or not at all. Your decision has just sent you on your way down that left fork to La La Land! Or maybe your friends want you to go party with them on a night before a big meet and you know full well that you shouldn't go, that you need the sleep and you should be resting your body. However, you don't want to miss out on all of the fun, so you go anyway. Guess what road you've just taken with that decision? You bet! To La La Land again!

Now it's obvious what the RIGHT road would be in each of these instances. When you're in the middle of doing sprints and your body is screaming for mercy, you think, "this is my chance to lift the level of my performance," and so you go even harder. When your coach or trainer suggests that you work on core strength exercises you think, "I don't really like this and it's not much fun but I'll never get better until I get stronger" so you put the time into strengthening this weakness regardless of whether you want to or not! When your buddies want to stay out late and party you think, "Yeah, it would be really fun to do that, but that college scholarship and getting as good as I can is so much more important to me," and so you apologize to them and don't go, regardless of all the crap that they then heap on you!

Which is the easier road to take? DUHHHHH! La La Land of course! It takes no character, discipline or special effort to get really proficient at taking the left road, which is exactly why so many people do so. The right fork is far more difficult to consistently take! When you go down the RIGHT ROAD you have to SACRIFICE! You have to CONTINUOUSLY PUSH YOURSELF OUTSIDE OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE. The RIGHT ROAD is always more frustrating and involves setbacks and failures. It frequently takes so much longer and INVOLVES REAL SUFFERING. So a question readily arises here:

Why would anyone in their right mind bother to consistently take the right road? Why put yourself through all that aggravation and hardship? It's so much easier to go down the left fork and not have to work up a sweat.

How you answer this question is absolutely critical for you as an athlete. You can say that you'll take the right road because it's more rewarding. It'll make you feel much better about yourself. You'll accomplish far more in your life. You'll ultimately be successful if you do so. All these answers are true. However, you'll take the right fork, the right road for one main reason. YOU WANT TO! You'll take the right road if YOU have an emotionally compelling reason to do so! There has to be something down that right fork that YOU really want, that's REALLY important to YOU. You can't take the right fork because it's just the "right thing" to do. You can't take it because you have a lot of talent and it will please your parents if you do so. You can't take it for the coaches. You have to TAKE THE RIGHT ROAD because YOU WANT IT! YOU HAVE TO DO IT FOR YOU!!!!

In other words, you have to have what I call a “BIG ENOUGH WHY,” some personal goal, dream or mission that has captured your heart and imagination and provides you with ample enough reason to sacrifice, work hard, and do whatever it takes to become successful. Your BIG ENOUGH WHY could be trying to beat a particular opponent, make a specific team, earn a college scholarship, smash your personal best, qualify for Olympic Trials or even to compete at the Olympics and come back with a medal! With a “BIG ENOUGH WHY” it will be easier for you to consistently make the right choices whenever you get to that crossroad. In fact, it’s when you’re at the crossroad and being emotionally pulled down the left fork that you need that “Big Enough Why” the most. If you can continually remind yourself of why you’re training whenever the going gets really rough, then you’ll get tough and keep on going in the right direction. It’s the thought of your big goal or dream in practice that will help you to stay motivated and on track. In fact, you want to be able to consistently ask yourself in practice, “How is what I’m doing today/right now going to help me get to my goal?”

How is what I’m doing today and right now going to help me get to my goal?

This question will help you raise the quality and intensity of your training. It will give your practices both a meaning and purpose. It will help you take responsibility for your training and cut down on those times where you just seem to be going through the motions. It will help you learn and improve faster. Ultimately, this question will help you turn your dreams into reality. You don’t want to be out-to-lunch whenever you train. Keeping your “BIG WHY” in mind during practices will always insure that you’re not spacing out in La La Land!

So just what road are YOU on whenever YOU practice? Are you motivated to consistently head to the Champion’s Zone or do your interests lie in exploring the hills and dales of La La Land? Answer the following questions to find out: Use True (T) or False (F) answers.

- ___ I have a clear "Big Enough Why"
- ___ I think about my big goal at least once or twice a day during practice
- ___ I am frequently bored in practice and often don't see the point of what we do
- ___ I have a purpose/something I want to work on in each practice that I attend
- ___ I frequently have a tough time getting up for practice
- ___ I usually ease back a bit whenever I get tired in training
- ___ I regularly put in extra time outside of practice to work on my weaknesses
- ___ I don't have a specific BIG WHY other than I love this sport and want to get as good as possible
- ___ My motto is "if it hurts in practice, it's just not worth doing."
- ___ I don't see the point in practicing hard if I'm never going to get recognized by my coach.
- ___ When the going gets rough, I go harder
- ___ I'd much prefer to hang out with my friends than train hard
- ___ I find myself thinking about my athletic goals outside of practice
- ___ I can always find something positive to get out of even the most boring of practices
- ___ I often question why I'm competing

Scoring & Interpretation:

Key:

#1 – T = 1 point

#6 – F = 1 point

#11 – T = 1 point

#2 – T = 1 “

#7 – T = 1 “

#12 – F = 1 “

#3 – F = 1 “

#8 – T = 1 “

#13 – T = 1 “

#4 – T = 1 “

#9 – F = 1 “

#14 – T = 1 “

#5 – F = 1 “

#10 – F = 1 “

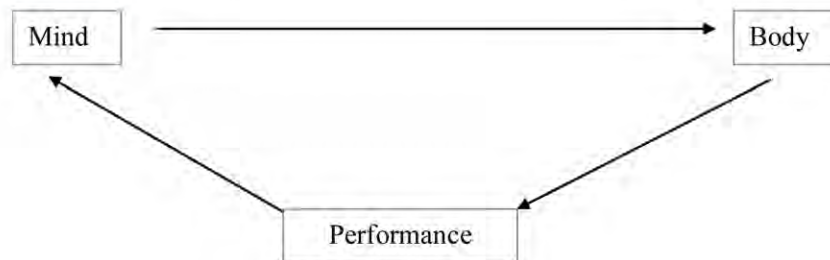
#15 – F = 1 “

There are a total of 15 points that you can get as a high score. The higher your score, the more directed and motivated you are in your pursuit of the Champion's Zone. Scores between 12 and 15 indicate that you are making excellent use of training and are almost consistently taking the right fork. Scores between 8 and 11 indicate that your motivation is a bit off and you're not getting the most out of practice that you could. Scores between 4 and 7 indicate that you are seriously holding yourself back because of your focus in practice and overall attitude. Scores lower than 4 indicate that you are a "tour guide" for La La Land and suggest that you might want to take up another sport.

step3

Understanding the mind → body → performance connection

Events/races are won and lost before the start and finish because of the interrelationship between your mind, body and performance. In other words, what you think or say to yourself right before and during your meet, right before your race or event goes instantly and directly into your body and touches off some subtle, but important physiological changes. These small physical changes, in turn, significantly affect how well you perform. (see figure #2).



Mind

What are the wrong things to think or say to yourself before your performance?

Take a moment now to carefully review your pre- and during meet self-talk for all your bad performances. These represent the **WRONG** things to be thinking about. For example, "I have to place first!" "What if I screw up and lose the lead during the relay?" "What if I run through?" "What if I no height?" "I had such a terrible warm up." "I NEVER compete well against these guys." "I know my opponent is so much better than me!" "What if we lose to them again?" "I always

seem to compete badly during evening meets” are all thoughts that will set you up for failure. Why? Because these thoughts distract you from the task at hand and worse, they make you NERVOUS/ANXIOUS!

Body

What happens in your body when you get nervous?

First, and big time devastating, your muscles begin to tighten.

Second, your breathing speeds up and gets shallower.

Third, digestion shuts down leaving you feeling nauseous or queasy.

Fourth, your hands and feet get cold as your blood flow is diverted away from the extremities into the deeper muscle groups.

Fifth, your heart rate and blood pressure go up.

Performance

How is your performance negatively affected by these physical changes?

TIGHT MUSCLES – Slow your reaction time down; Make you less flexible; Throw you off your rhythm and disrupt your timing; Distract your focus from what’s happening in the moment; Dramatically slow your foot speed down; Make you less explosive; Tire you out quicker; Make you more vulnerable to injuries; Insure that you will feel the pain and fatigue of oxygen debt much more intensely once you get tired; ALL OF THESE ADDING UP TO YOU PERFORMING TO ONLY A FRACTION OF YOUR POTENTIAL!!!!!!! Competing with tight muscles is like trying to drive a car with the emergency brake engaged! You’ll go NOWHERE fast and burn yourself out in the process!!!

FASTER AND SHALLOWER BREATHING - Tightens your muscles even more; Throws your rhythm and timing further off; Interferes with your normal breathing cycle; Totally and absolutely kills your endurance and makes you feel like you’re completely out of shape; If you're a runner, it makes it more difficult for you to quickly recover from your previous race; Further distracts you from maintaining the right focus; Makes it impossible to think clearly and accurately

react to various situations, ALL OF THESE ADDING UP TO A SUPREMELY AWFUL PERFORMANCE!!!!!!!!!!

COLD HANDS AND FEET – Make it that much more difficult to get a good feel of what you're doing. This is especially critical in the field events of hammer, shot put, javelin and pole vault as well as in passing the baton in relays. If your hands are a bit cold, then you will lose that all important feel for what you're doing. Simply put, your touch will be way off. The same could be true in racing where feel in your feet is critical for quick, explosive starts.

Exercise:

Using your imagination to demonstrate the mind power of your “inner coach.”

Try the following exercise to get a “hands on” feel for the power that your “inner coach” can wield. Stand up with your feet shoulder width apart. Take both arms and raise them so that they are perpendicular to your body, shoulder height, palms facing each other and approximately shoulder width apart. Take your left palm and rotate the palm only so that it is facing up. Next, make sure that your right thumb is pointing straight up. Next, close your eyes and imagine, in as much detail as possible that in your left hand you have a very heavy book like a Webster’s unabridged dictionary. Imagine that attached to your right thumb is a string. Attached to that string is a rather large balloon and that balloon is filled with helium, a gas that rises. Repeat to yourself 3 times, very slowly “my left arm is getting heavier and heavier and falling.” Now repeat three times, “my right arm is getting lighter and lighter and rising.” As you do this try to really imagine the book and balloon in your hand and feel their affect. Then a second time, very slowly repeat three times, “my left arm is getting heavier and heavier and falling,” followed very slowly by, “my right arm is getting lighter and lighter and rising.” Finally, slowly repeat these same phrases three more times.

Purpose:

What you think right before and during your event will have a tremendous impact on how you end up feeling and therefore on how well you’ll ultimately perform. Did you notice that your left hand and arm felt much heavier or more

tired than the right? If you did, you were able to create a real, physical state (heaviness or tension in that left arm) just by using your imagination. So just what kind of “inner coaching” have you been providing yourself? Are you programming things into your head that get you to reach higher and achieve your goals like that right arm? Or, like the left arm, is your “inner coaching” weighing you down and spoiling your performance?



step4

Changing negative inner coaching to positive

If you don't already know it just yet, NOTHING GOOD EVER COMES FROM BEING NEGATIVE! NOTHING! When you consistently put yourself down after a mistake or bad break, or catch yourself doing things wrong, the only "good" you'll do for yourself is to kill your self-confidence. I don't have to tell you that there's nothing positive in being negative in that way!!!! So if the bar moves up to 11 feet and you're telling yourself "no way I can clear this," or you look across the starting line at the other runners and think, "I'm just not as good as they are," then how will being negative and down on yourself in this way help you rise to the occasion and perform to your potential? Well, of course it won't! On the contrary!!! Being negative will only serve to further undermine your confidence, tighten your muscles and insure that you end up under achieving! Instead you need to learn to systematically retrain your "inner coach" so that he/she becomes more positive and supportive. Here's how:

#1 Keeping a negativity log

Spend at least one week as an "investigative reporter". Who are you going to investigate? YOU and your negative "inner coach." Each night jot down all the negative things that you said to yourself that day both at school and at practice. As you got ready for practice, what negatives did you feed yourself? As you went through practice, what negatives were bopping around "upstairs?" In the middle of your pole vault or high jump what uninspiring things were you thinking? When you knocked over a hurdle or registered a slow time, what comments did your inner coach make? If your track coach got angry at you, what was the response from that inner critic? Without editing or attempting to "be positive," try to allow

these typical negative thoughts to freely flow. However, be sure to sit down that very night and record each and every one of these negative thoughts. You may be surprised to find that just by deliberately paying attention to how negative you are for an entire week, you'll actually begin to cut down on some of your negativity.

#2 Using A “Victory Log” To Break The Negativity Habit

After spending some time getting to really “know” your “negative inner coach,” let's start to train a more positive one. Negativity is nothing more than a bad habit. For most of us it's much easier and more familiar to be negative than it is to be positive. Right NOW it's time to stop giving in to this self-destructive temptation! Starting today, I want you to keep a journal of all your small “victories.” Whatever you did that day at practice or on your own that was even a little positive should get recorded. For example, if you normally hold yourself back during wind sprints and instead you went all out, then record that. If you have a tendency to avoid working on your weaknesses and today you did some work on strengthening your hip flexors, then record that too. If the coach said something positive to you about your effort, attitude, or focus, then that should get in there as well. If you put in some good work on medicine ball drills that focused on improving your shot put, then record that also. As you look for these small victories, it is critical that you IGNORE that negative part of you that may be saying, “Ohhh, isn't that cute, you went harder instead of giving in the way you always do!” DON'T CENSOR THE POSITIVE! NO VICTORY IS TOO SMALL.

When Will You Need Your “Victory Log?”

You should spend time daily recording at least 10-15 little victories. If you come up with more, GREAT! Your victory log will provide you with a helpful perspective when things aren't going well. Whenever athletes go through rough spots in their training or career, they tend to forget that they ever accomplished anything positive. It's during these tougher times that your victory log will provide you with a much needed, more positive perspective.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Use your victory log daily for at least 30 days. Turning a bad habit around and developing a new one usually takes about a month. However, my suggestion is that you get in the habit of using your victory log as a regular part of your training all season long. It will only take you a few minutes

every evening to make your entries and this small investment of time will pay off huge dividends later.

#3 Eliminate The “C” Word To Build Confidence

The biggest confidence drain to your competitive performance is COMPARISON. When you compare yourself to teammates or opponents right before that big meet or your best event, then you will be setting yourself up for failure big time! When you play the “comparison game” you’ll ALWAYS lose! First of all, what others are doing is TOTALLY irrelevant to what YOU are doing. Second, comparisons ignore or discount your strengths, accomplishments and unique gifts. Third, the athlete who compares herself to a teammate or opponent is most often using the worst part of her imagination to evaluate herself. Why? Because our internal view of a teammate or opponent is usually skewed so that he/she always looks much faster, stronger or more skilled than we do. Think about YOU and YOUR training. Think about YOUR strengths. Forget about what your teammates or opponents are doing. In the end, they are basically irrelevant to you, your goals and how well you’ll compete. To help you blow the whistle on comparisons and end this confidence killing habit, spend a week or two logging your comparison thoughts on paper. Like with the “negativity journal,” keep a record of all your comparison thoughts at meets, practices and in school. You may be completely surprised to finally become aware of just how much comparing you’re currently doing. Remember, AWARENESS is always the first important step towards change. To be able to put an end to the comparison habit you want to become exquisitely aware of exactly how and how often you’re doing it.

#4 “Make Lemonade”

“When life gives you lemons, make lemonade out of them!” This old adage instructs you to take the bad things that happen to you during your track and field career and “reframe” them in a more positive way. When you get in the habit of looking for the solution in the problem, sooner or later you’ll discover that you’ll get much further as an athlete and as a person. Dwelling on problems will always keep you stuck in them. Reframing these same problems by looking for solutions in them will get you back on track and in the fast lane again. Examples of reframes: Your teammate and best friend is consistently running the last leg of the 4X100

relay and it's starting to make you upset. Reframe = My friend is challenging me to work harder and rededicate myself. This is an opportunity to take my event to the next level. The crowd is rowdy, noisy and nasty and they've singled you out to pick on. Reframe= This is a wonderful opportunity for me to work on my concentration abilities and to practice staying focused on what's important and letting go of everything else. You have to compete against a really great high jumper/vaulter and you're feeling intimidated. Reframe = This is yet another opportunity to both challenge myself and lift the level of my event because better opponents will teach you far more than weaker ones. You had a mediocre or disappointing jump/race and you're starting to get down on yourself. Reframe = You learn more from failures than you do from successes. I can learn what I did wrong and use it to compete better next time.

Exercise:

Take the following problems and reframe them, and then begin practicing this mental skill on a daily basis:

You have never done well against this team before.

Reframe =

Large crowd with college coaches watching.

Reframe =

You have to race in really cold/hot/rainy conditions.

Reframe =

You didn't get enough time to properly warm up.

Reframe =

A teammate who has always had shorter jumps than you is starting to improve and catch up to you.

Reframe =

In training, the coach seems to be harder on you than everyone else.

Reframe =

#5 Turn Negatives Into Positives

Negativity is a nasty habit that will undercut your confidence and sabotage your event. It is always in your best interests as an athlete to begin to develop the much better habit of being positive. Understand that **NOTHING GOOD COMES FROM BEING NEGATIVE!** When you hear your negative self speaking up in practice or right before the start of the meet/event, don't take him/her seriously enough to listen. Instead get in the habit of substituting 4- 5 positive things. Imagine how you would end up feeling if every time you had a negative thought, it was instantly followed by 4- 5 positive ones. For example, "He's so much faster than me and I'll never be able to keep up with him" can be followed by: "He may have more speed but I've been training really well the last several months. I'm in great shape and can run all day. Plus I have a better head for strategy. I'm aggressive and not afraid of leaving it all on the track. And let's not forget that I'm mentally tough." Remember, when you first try to turn negatives into positives, you can count on part of you **NOT** believing the positive messages. Understand that it is **NOT** important whether you believe these positives in the beginning. It is only important that you get in the habit of immediately replacing any and all negatives with 4-5 positive thoughts. It also doesn't matter if some of your positive thoughts are on the humorous side. For example: "I've never outplaced her before" can be followed by: "I absolutely love the javelin. My mental training has been going really well. My pre-delivery stride has gotten much better, etc.

Exercise:

At home, take 4 of your typical pre-meet/event negative thoughts and for each negative statement, come up with 4-5 positive thoughts. Remember, you don't necessarily have to believe these positive statements in the beginning. If you keep using this strategy of turning a negative thought into multiple positive ones, within a few short weeks you'll find yourself in the habit of being positive.

#6 Using Affirmations

Another powerful tool for systematically turning around a negative attitude and building confidence is by getting in the habit of using **AFFIRMATIONS**. An affirmation is a **POSITIVE STATEMENT THAT YOU MAKE ABOUT YOURSELF AS IF IT IS TRUE RIGHT NOW**. For example, if you consistently get fatigued towards

the end of your races, your affirmation might be, “as the race gets longer, I get stronger.” If you tend to get much too nervous before your event, your affirmation might be, “I’m cool and calm in the clutch. The bigger the match-up, the better I perform.” If you tend to be negative under pressure then your affirmation could be, “I stay positive NO MATTER WHAT!”

When used correctly, affirmations form powerful bridges between how you feel NOW and how you would like to feel in the FUTURE. Your affirmations should be written on index cards and posted all around your room so that you see them continuously throughout the day. Carry some in your schoolbooks. Put some in your locker. Have some in your training bag. Like positive statements, it is not necessary that you believe your affirmations in the beginning. It is only important that you make a point out of looking at these positive statements over and over again throughout the day.

#7 Affirmations And The Presleep Technique

One effective way to get your affirmations into your unconscious and muscle memory is to use the “pre-sleep technique.” Take one particular affirmation that you’re working on at the moment, i.e. “I stay cool and calm in the clutch” and repeat it to yourself slowly as you lie in bed at night with the lights off. After the first repetition, try to imagine, in as much detail as possible, experiencing yourself doing just that, being in a big pressure situation and maintaining your composure and competing well. Slowly repeat your affirmation a second time, once again imagining yourself staying focused and composed under pressure. Continue this sequence of slowly repeating your affirmation with the accompanying imagery a total of 15 - 20 times before you fall asleep. If you find that you only get through 10 repetitions before sleep overtakes you, don’t worry. Continue this technique every night before bed.

#8 Mastering Last Minute Negative Thoughts And Self-Doubts

Far too many track and field athletes get knocked off balance before their events by last minute negative thoughts and self-doubts. They get “emotionally hijacked” so-to-speak by these negatives, letting their fears and worries run away with their confidence, focus and, as a consequence, good performance. It is absolutely critical for you to understand that you can still have the run/jump/throw/

vault of your life, even if you are flooded with last minute doubts or negativity. How is this possible?

First, you must understand that LAST MINUTE DOUBTS AND NEGATIVITY ARE ABSOLUTELY NORMAL. Even the very best athletes in the world sometimes entertain these thoughts right before their big events. However, they have figured out that YOU CAN STILL HAVE THE PERFORMANCE OF YOUR LIFE WITH LAST MINUTE NEGATIVES BOPPING AROUND IN YOUR CRANIUM. The trick is not to allow yourself to get caught up with them. How do you do this? You must train yourself to use the negative thinking and self-doubts as neutral signals to simply RELAX AND REFOCUS ON THE TASK AT HAND. For example, if you're waiting for the gun and you hear yourself thinking, "what if I have another bad performance again?" you want to quickly and calmly shift your focus back to what you might normally be doing right before your event, i.e. warming up, stretching, etc.

At crunch time you do NOT want to engage or fight with the negative thoughts and doubts. You don't even want to try to be positive! That's right! When you're waiting for the start or your approach, you don't ever want to try to turn the negative thoughts around into positives! Why? If you start thinking, "I'm being negative, I've got to be positive" then YOU ARE THINKING and you will immediately distract yourself from the flow of the event. You can't run or jump well by thinking yourself through the race/jump. You have to let the performance happen automatically. Performing like a champion is all about trusting your instincts and letting the race/jump/throw or vault come to you. Therefore any time your mind is throwing out negatives, you want to immediately shift your focus to what YOU are doing in that moment!

Here's a metaphor for dealing with any assault by negative thinking and self-doubts. When these last minute negatives begin to "attack" you, you want to respond as if you were an Aikido master. Aikido is a "soft" martial art where the practitioner meets an assault by utilizing the attacker's own force and momentum to effortlessly neutralize him. The fighter skilled in Aikido may, for example, quickly slip to one side, grab his attacker's wrist and twist it in just such a way as to completely and immediately render his assailant powerless. Rather than letting yourself get caught up in fighting with your own negativity, you want to effortlessly

side step those thoughts by REFOCUSING ON THE TASK AT HAND. If the negatives persist, then again, refocus without emotionally engaging them.

Don't worry if the negative thinking or doubts keep coming at you. They are nothing more than brain wave activity and they don't predict the future. Notice them, accept them as normal and then quickly return your focus to the task at hand as often as you need to!

#9 Use Humor

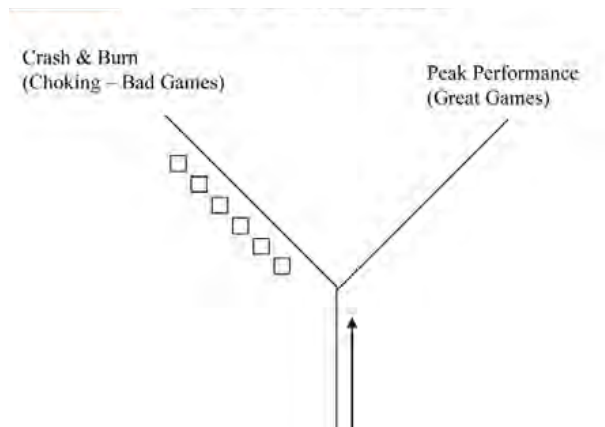
Another strategy you might try is to greet your typical negative thoughts and doubts with humor. For example, right before that all important meet you hear, "you're going to blow it, I can just feel it! You're going to run through again!" Instead of engaging those thoughts by thinking, "NO I'm NOT!" or "Stop thinking that! That's being negative. I have to be positive!" you might quickly think "Gee, that was really helpful! Thanks so much for sharing" or "A thought for you my little friend. I'm just about to compete. Perhaps you may want to get yourself some water and a snack, and I'll chat with you when I'm done!" When you use humor on yourself in response to these last minute negatives, you neutralize the emotional reaction so common to them and therefore you end up staying calm and relaxed, both of which are absolutely critical to your performing at your best when it counts the most.

i.e. Neg. thoughts → self-doubts → increased nervousness → increased worry → increased self-doubts → tight muscles → distracted focus → choking & poor performance

Neg. thought → self-doubts → "it's normal...thanks for sharing, catch you later" → refocus → relax → great performance

#10 - Know The "Signs" - The Road To Crash & Burn

Imagine that you are driving down "X," a road mapped out in figure #4. You are in a hurry and don't know the area. Suddenly several hundred yards ahead you see a fork in the road. You desperately look for a place to stop for directions because you have absolutely no clue which fork you should take. Unfortunately, there are no signs of intelligent life anywhere so you pull over to the side of the road, stop the car and get out. You start walking towards the fork and that's when you see it.



At first you're a little embarrassed that you missed it, because there, right by the left fork is a sign that says, "Dead End." You chuckle to yourself as you get back in the car, turn on the ignition, put it in drive and step on the gas. When you get to the intersection you turn the wheel sharply to the left and go down the wrong road. A little further down the road there's another sign that says, "Road ends, 2 miles." You smile to yourself and step on the gas. Soon you come to another sign that says, "Warning, road ends 1 mile." You continue to accelerate the car. Shortly after you approach another sign that reads, "Road ends, ½ mile NO Outlet." You continue to accelerate. Then you pass a sign that says, "Danger. Road ends 1300 feet, 5000 foot drop." You think to yourself, "cool, I've never been over a 5000 foot cliff before in a car" and you continue to accelerate.

Both you and I know that no one on his right mind would go down this road the way I've just described. However, there are two good reasons why someone who was actually sane would do this: #1 THEY DIDN'T SEE THE SIGNS! #2 THEY SAW THE SIGNS AND CHOSE TO IGNORE THEM.

What's this example have to do with you and performing well at crunch time? PLENTY! There are numerous personal "signs" as you approach a meet/event which let you know that "you're going down the wrong road." If you miss them or chose to ignore them, then you will consistently end up performing poorly. What are these signs? They represent the typical, unhelpful things that you tend to say to yourself or think as the meet or event approaches, or in between events. The more you entertain these thoughts, the further down that road you'll get and the more

difficult it will be for you to turn yourself around and go down the right road.

For example, let's say the very first sign that I'm heading down the wrong road is when I start thinking about the competition: "They are so good and so fast. We've never beaten them before." This thought may then be followed by, "What if I mess up like I did last meet." My next thought might be, "I'm feeling really slow today" followed by "I'm feeling tight and tired." That then might lead to my thinking about a bad performance three weeks ago. As I let each of these thoughts lead, uninterrupted into the next one, my confidence continues to drop and my level of nervousness rises. Or let's say that I fail my first two jumps at a height I normally clear. My very first response to that, my first "sign" might be, "You're gonna no-height, I can feel it! You should've been able to clear it on your first attempt!" If I let that one go uninterrupted it may be followed by, "You always seem to choke under pressure." The next thought/sign might be, "If you fail this jump coach will be really upset with you!" The further I let myself get "down the road" into these thoughts, the more trouble I'm going to get into performance-wise. As an athlete you must train yourself to recognize the very first sign that you're heading down the wrong road so that you can quickly "turn the car around" and head down the right road. Spend some time with the following exercise:

Exercise:

Reading your "signs" to 'crash & burn' – Chose two or more past performance situations where you got too nervous to perform to your potential. Think back to the very first sign (self-talk) that let you know you were heading down the wrong road. You may have been at home, the night before the meet, in the car driving to the track, or warming up right before the meet. Now think back to the very next negative thought (second sign) that followed. Where did this thought lead? (third sign). Write down in sequence each of these thoughts leading right up to the start of the meet and including your thoughts right before and during your events. Remember, if you can easily recognize the typical signs that indicate you're going down the wrong road, then you are in a position to be able to turn things around. If you can't recognize your habitually negative pre-meet/event self-talk, then you will be doomed to continue to "go over the cliff" and perform badly.

THE WISE TRACK ATHLETE SAYETH: “The problem is NOT the problem. The real problem is how you REACT to the problem.”

It is critically important for you to keep an understanding of this little saying in the back of your mind. Far too many athletes get knocked off track by things that happen during the meet: a bad start off the blocks, an unexpected injury to your star sprinter, a really bad first throw/jump, a missed hurdle, the difficulty of competing in unfamiliar or scary surroundings, etc. Save your energy and keep your head on straight! In so many things in track and field as well as in life, the problem that has just happened and seems to be causing you so much heartache and aggravation is NOT the real problem. The REAL problem is always how YOU decide to REACT to this problem. It’s always your reaction that gets you into hot water far more than the actual event that occurred.



step5

Developing Awareness Of Your Focus Of Concentration

Concentration is the most central and important mental skill in mental toughness. If you always seem to get too nervous right before your event or consistently practice far better than when you compete, if you have a terrible time letting go of mistakes or bad breaks, if you get easily intimidated or psyched out, then chances are quite good that your pre-meet and during meet concentration is way off. By learning to control your focus of concentration, you will better handle competitive pressure, avoid psych-outs and intimidation, quickly rebound from mistakes and bad breaks, keep your self-confidence at a high level and more consistently perform your best when it counts the most. UNDERSTAND THAT ONE OF THE MAIN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN YOUR BEST AND WORST PERFORMANCES IS WHERE YOU PUT YOUR FOCUS OF CONCENTRATION.

DISCOVERING THE CONCENTRATION DIFFERENCES BETWEEN YOUR BEST & WORST PERFORMANCES

Exercise:

Recall in detail a GREAT MEET performance. Where and when were you competing? Who were you competing for? Who were you competing against? How big was the crowd? What, if anything was at stake? Now try to remember your focus of concentration on the day of the meet. Where was your focus during warm-ups? Were you focusing on yourself and what you were doing or was your concentration locked on how big the meet was, who you were competing against and what would happen if you didn't do well? What did you concentrate on during the coach's pre-meet talk? At the start of your event? After a mistake or bad race/

throw/jump or hurdle? After turning in a great performance? If and when you got tired? If your opponent tried to play head games with you? Record your answers on Worksheet #3, Concentration & Good Performances. Now answer the very same questions for at least two more great meet performances. After reviewing your concentration for three or more of your better showings, you will begin to get a good idea of where YOU need to keep your focus in order for you to do your best.

Next, pick a particularly BAD MEET performance from your past, a time when you felt that you really stunk the place out. In as much detail as possible, recall what you were focusing on the day of that meet. Where was your focus during warm ups? What did you concentrate on just before and when your event began? If you got beaten, where did your concentration go? Where was your focus during your teammates' performances? Where was your focus right before your races? What did you focus on when things got tough? Use Worksheet #4 Concentration & Bad Performances to record your answers. Take two or three more disappointing performances and answer the very same questions for each one. After reviewing your concentration for each of these bad performances you should begin to develop a pretty good idea of what you shouldn't be focusing on both before and during your meets.

Do You Perform Better In Practice Than You Do In Big Meet Competition?

If you are like a lot of track and field athletes I've worked with over the years, then you'd answer with a resounding and frustrating YES to this question! "I perform great in practice. I throw the javelin with uncanny accuracy and distance when I'm by myself," you complain..."so how come my skills do a disappearing act when it counts and I can't seem to buy a decent throw when it counts?"; or "My times are so much faster in training than in my actual races"; or "How come I can consistently clear 6 feet in practice yet in meets, I can't seem to break 5', 9?" You can easily come up with the solutions to these puzzling questions by doing a similar concentration exercise.

Exercise:

Take a moment to examine your concentration in practice as compared to pressured meet situations using Worksheet #5 Concentration in Practice vs. Meets. What do you concentrate on in practice? When you are tired or hurting in practice,

where do you put your focus of concentration? When you make mistakes, have a bad jump or poor throw, what happens to your focus? How is that concentration different from your meet focus when these same things happen? There is no mystery why a talented sprinter or distance runner will go faster in practice than she will under big meet pressure. It is directly related to having a different focus of concentration in both of those situations. The first step in developing the concentration of a champion is to become aware of these differences. Examine your worksheets to see if you can begin to discover the concentration differences between practice and performance.

What Is Concentration?

Focus On What's Important & Let Go Of Everything Else

Remember that poor performance is NEVER a question of not concentrating! You are always concentrating both before and during your events. The more important question here is, "EXACTLY WHAT ARE YOU CONCENTRATING ON?" If you focus on the wrong things either before or during your event, then you will always perform poorly, way below your capabilities. At meet time there are many, many things that can distract you from having a proper focus: Your opponents and how big, strong, fast or talented they are; How you feel that day; The size of the crowd and who may be in it watching you; What's been going on in school and your personal life; The track conditions; The weather; The officials; Your teammates and how they're performing; Your coach's yelling and comments both before and during the meet; How big this meet is; and the list goes on and on! It is your job to KNOW exactly what is important for you to focus on and what you should be letting go of. Here's an exercise to really help you develop a working understanding of this all important principle: FOCUS ON WHAT'S IMPORTANT AND LET GO OF EVERYTHING ELSE.

Catching Markers

Exercise:

Take 10 different colored magic markers and try the following "concentration test." Your task is to throw all 10 markers up at the same time relatively high above your head and to then try to catch as many as possible. It is important that when

you attempt to catch them, you only use your hands and your hands must be away from your body. (in other words, it's against the rules to trap the markers against your body). Scoring of your "concentration ability" is as follows: If you catch 10 out of 10, that's 100% and you have done an awesome job of focusing and we'll call you MR./MS. CONCENTRATION. If you catch 5 out of 10, that's 50%, which is a BIG "F" in any school. If you catch less than 5, that means that you're challenged concentration-wise. Now, throw all 10 up at the same time. If you do this correctly without cheating, then like most people I do this with, you probably only caught 0, 1 or 2 markers.

If this is the case, does it really mean that you can't concentrate? ABSOLUTELY NOT! This is an impossible task because there are too many things to focus on all at once. The fact of the matter is:

You Can Only Concentrate On One Thing Well At A Time

While you can certainly focus on a ton of things at once, when it comes down to peak performance, you can only concentrate on one thing well at a time. If this is true, then you better make darn sure that the one thing you are concentrating really well on is WHAT'S IMPORTANT!

Now, pick one special marker in your group of 10 to focus on. For example, let's say the red one. Take that marker, stick it in the middle of the other 9 and throw all 10 up once again at the same time. Remember, your job is to only catch that one red marker. What happens now? If you have relatively decent hand-eye coordination, then you effortlessly catch that red marker. The point? It's very easy to focus on what's important when you know exactly what that is ahead of time.

What's Important For You To Focus On Before And During Your Meets?

Using Focal Points

As we've already discussed, where you put your concentration before and during your meets determines whether you gobble with the turkeys or soar with the eagles. Where you put your focus of concentration is called a FOCAL POINT. Focal points can be KINESTHETIC or something that you FEEL. They can be VISUAL or something that you LOOK at. They can be AUDITORY or something that you LISTEN to. Focal points help you CONTROL YOUR EYES AND EARS. That is, they

provide you with a predetermined place for you to put your concentration that will help distract you from anything negative or distracting.

CONTROLLING YOUR EYES means that you only look at those things, before and during the meet that keep you calm, confident and ready to perform your best. For example, if focusing on the size, strength and skill of your opponents during warm-ups gets you nervous, you'd control your eyes by keeping them off your opponent and on one or more visual focal points. That is, on looking down at the track, watching yourself as you stretch, "looking" at the internal imagery of a perfect jump, vault or throw or simply defocusing your eyes so that you see nothing around you except blankness/whiteness.

CONTROLLING YOUR EARS similarly means that before and during the meet and your events you only listen to those things that keep you calm, confident and loose. For example, if people around you are talking about how big the meet is, what's at stake or how good the competition is and this is getting you nervous, then you'd control your ears by listening to your favorite music on your ipod, the sound of your breathing or specific self-talk that you usually repeat to yourself right before you perform well, i.e. counting your steps, (all AUDITORY FOCAL POINTS) and this would help distract you from the conversation that was making you uptight.

Examples of KINSETHETIC focal points are: The feeling of your stretch as you loosen up before your event; the feeling of your breath going in and out while you're stretching; As a sprinter, the feeling of your feet on the blocks or the feeling of your arms pumping as you run; As a high jumper or vaulter, the rhythm and feel of your approach, or your plant and take off. In the shot put or throwing events, the feel of the shot/hammer/javelin in your hands, the feel of your pre-throw ritual, etc.

Keep in mind that for a lot of athletes, KINESTHETIC focal points are the most important ones to have during your performances. In track and field, however, while you may be somewhat aware of the feel of the proper movements as you run, throw or jump/vault, the flow of the performance happens much too quickly for this awareness and focus to be conscious. As a result, if you do use kinesthetic focal points, they would be more beneficial for you before your event, in your pre-performance ritual as a tool to help you stay calm and focused.

Exercise:

List 4 Kinesthetic (K) or feeling focal points that you can use pre-meet/event.

K- Focal points: Pre-meet/event

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Examples of VISUAL (V) focal points are: Looking at the finish line before your race; Looking at a teammate while you carry on a conversation pre-event; Defocusing your eyes and “spacing out” as you look at the pit before your event starts; Keeping your eyes focused on the bar; Looking down at your feet or the track/infield. Etc.

Exercise:

List 4 Visual focal points that you can concentrate on before your event. List 4 Visual focal points you could use during your event.

V – Focal Points: Pre-event

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

V- Focal Points: During event

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Examples of AUDITORY (A) focal points are: Listening to music; Getting involved in a comfortable conversation with coach or teammates; Listening to the sound of your breathing; repeating a positive word or phrase to yourself over and over again; Listening to the sound of the crowd; Singing to yourself.

Exercise:

List 4 Auditory focal points that you can use pre-meet. List 4 Auditory focal points that you can use during your event.

A – Focal Points: Pre - event

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

A – Focal Points: During event

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Important Note:

It is NOT necessary for you to have more than one or two focal points either before or during your events. It is also NOT necessary for you to have all three kinds of focal points. What is important here is that you develop familiar concentration targets where you can consistently put your focus both before and during your meet performances.

Developing Championship Concentration

Do you know how to concentrate? This very simple skill is the heart of mental toughness and the secret to you consistently performing the way that you're physically capable of. Want to learn to quickly bounce back from mistakes, bad races, run-throughs or poor throws? Want to be at your best when the heat of competition is turned way up high? Then you have to learn to concentrate like a champion. To effectively build your concentration muscles you must begin to practice two mini-skills. First, you must recognize that your focus of concentration has veered away from what is important. Second, you must discipline yourself to quickly and gently bring your focus back to the proper target. Mastering this "recognize and return" skill will help turn you into a mentally tough athlete.

Numbers With Distractions

Exercise: Sit quietly with your eyes closed, feet flat on the floor. Put your focus of concentration on your breathing. When you inhale, focus on the feeling in your lower belly of the air coming in. When you exhale and feel the air going out, focus on the number 1. You can "see" a number one in your mind's eye. You can repeat "one" in your head, or you can do a combination. Inhale, feel the breath. Exhale focus on the number. Since this is a boring exercise you'll find your mind beginning to wander. When you do drift: Quickly recognize that you've lost the proper focus. Return your concentration to your breathing and the feeling of the air coming in. As you exhale focus on the number 2. You can see the #2 in your mind's eye, repeat the sound "two" in your head, or do a combination. Inhale focus on the breath, exhale focus on the number. Each time you lose your focus and drift, add a number. Do this exercise for 3 minutes without any distractions and then turn a radio or CD player on and try the same exercise for an additional minute or two.

Developing A Concentration Cue

Exercise:

(At home) Take your spikes or any object like a trophy, medal or paper weight and sit 3-4 feet away from them. Pick a specific spot on them to gently rest your eyes. Your eyes will stay on this spot the entire exercise. Shift your focus to your breathing and when you inhale, feel your lower belly rise. As you exhale and feel

your diaphragm deflate, repeat a word to yourself. The word will become your “concentration cue” or concentration signal/reminder. You can use words like “gold,” “focus,” “power,” “strong,” “now,” etc. Whenever your focus drifts from your visual target, breathing or word, quickly and gently return your focus. Do this exercise for 3 minutes without any distractions. Then take your object and put it on top of a TV set. Sit far enough back so that in order for you to still see your spot, you must also see the entire screen. Turn the TV on but with very low volume at first. Try to stay focused on your spot for the next minute and a half without getting distracted by the images on the TV screen. When you do get distracted, quickly return your focus to your spot and concentration cue.

Note:

Sufficient at-home practice of this simple, 4.5 minute exercise will develop and fine-tune your concentration abilities. Soon you will be able to quickly refocus yourself just by quietly repeating your concentration cue to yourself either pre-meet or pre-event. Understand that this exercise is absolutely critical in helping you strengthen your concentration muscles. If you’re the kind of athlete who tends to hang onto mistakes, bad throws or poor jumps, who easily gets psyched out or intimidated or who has trouble staying calm under pressure, then I strongly recommend that you work with this exercise regularly.



step6

Keep Your Meet/Event Focus On You For Great Performances

One of the more common concentration mistakes made by track and field athletes at every level is to get too caught up with the competition. When you focus too much on your opponent before or during your event, you make yourself nervous and stop focusing on the things that help you perform your best when it counts the most. As a result, you'll always find that you're slower, weaker and less explosive than if you were to concentrate just on YOU! Thinking about how big, strong, fast or talented your opponent may be, how high he/she can jump/vault or how far he/she can throw is probably the best way that I know of to TOTALLY FREAK YOURSELF OUT!!! In fact, allowing your focus of concentration to drift too much to your opponents either before or during your events is the best strategy there is to intimidate and psych yourself out. Instead, you have to train yourself to STAY INSIDE YOURSELF AND FOCUS ON WHAT YOU USUALLY DO, ON JUST YOUR PERFORMANCE!

What does this actually mean?

It means simply to focus on YOU, to not get caught up in comparing yourself with the opposition, to not get distracted by comparing yourself with your teammates. COMPARISON is a dirty word in sports. When you get caught up in comparing yourself you will almost always come out on the short end of the stick. Why? Because comparison is something that we do in our head, using our imagination. Most of the time your imagination will give you a negatively distorted picture of your skills and ability in relation to others. If you really want to beat a particular individual or team, what this means is that you have to focus even more on yourself and your performance and NOT on them! This is an important

contradiction that most athletes and coaches don't fully understand. To beat the competition you must focus on YOU, NOT on THEM! If you get too caught up with how good you think that they are or what you think they can do, then you'll tend to get yourself too uptight to compete at your best. As a result you'll go out there and either try too hard, or you'll be so intimidated by your opponent that you'll compete cautiously and tentatively.

The wise shot putter sayeth:

REMEMBER, THE MORE YOU CONCENTRATE ON BEATING ANOTHER ATHLETE, THE LESS CHANCE THAT YOU WILL! THE LESS YOU FOCUS ON BEATING AN OPPONENT AND THE MORE YOU FOCUS ON YOU AND YOUR PERFORMANCE, THE MORE CHANCE THAT YOU WILL BEAT THEM!

Understand this:

EVERY MOMENT DURING A MEET/EVENT WHERE YOU ARE FOCUSING ON THE OPPONENT AND HOW GOOD YOU THINK HE/SHE IS, IS A MOMENT THAT'S WASTED, A MOMENT WHERE YOU'RE HANDICAPPING YOURSELF, A MOMENT WHEN YOU WILL COMPETE BELOW YOUR ABILITY!

If you spend time worrying about an opponent, then you are robbing yourself of your speed, confidence and skills! How good your opponent is on paper, the kind of buildup your coach or others may have given him/her, their reputation, etc. are all totally irrelevant to whether you'll compete the way you're capable of. You want your energy and focus on YOU, on your own performance and not on THEM! Yes, it may occasionally be useful to have some scouting info on your opponent and his/her tendencies. However, getting too caught up in that information will most often psych you out. Stay inside yourself. Focus on YOU!

Exercise:

Practice focusing on YOU in practice. During drills and practices be alert to whenever your focus of concentration drifts to a teammate, the coach or someone watching. Immediately catch yourself and return your focus to what YOU are doing, to YOUR job right at the moment. If you find that you are focusing on a teammate and comparing yourself, then quickly interrupt this focus and bring yourself back to YOU. Try to get in the habit of immediately catching yourself the instant you drift away from YOU and what you're doing and then quickly coming

back. The more that you work on this in practice, the easier it will be for you to stay inside yourself in pressured situations. Understand that when I say just focus on YOU, I am NOT telling you that you can't focus on your opponent when it's relevant. In those situations, depending upon your event, it may be helpful to have some of your concentration on them physically. However, more often times than not, your concentration should mainly be on your own performance and what you do.



step 7

Stay In The “Now” For Peak Performance

Another common and costly concentration mistake made by many athletes at the big meet is what I call “MENTAL TIME TRAVELING.” What “time traveling” involves is mentally leaving the present, or the NOW and either going back into the PAST or jumping ahead into the FUTURE. For example, if you had a bad warm-up and you’re still thinking about that as your event is about to begin, then you are mentally in the past. If you get burned by an opponent and you can’t seem to stop thinking about it, then you are again in the past. Similarly, if you go into a meet thinking about the last time that you competed badly at this track, then you’re mentally in the past.

As far as track and field athletes go, hanging out in the PAST is a universal mental mistake and one that will distract you from the task at hand and kill your confidence. To compete your best, you have to learn to immediately let your mistakes go. Carrying your screw-ups around with you during a meet will NOT help you correct them. In fact, the time for you to work on your mistakes is always IN PRACTICE after the meet and NEVER during the meet!

What can you do to quickly let your mistakes go?

First of all you have to get good at recognizing that your focus of concentration is in the PAST. One way to do this is to know what the language is of the past. There are certain words and phrases that your “inner coach” uses that are clues to your being in the past. For example,

Track and field athletes who tend to mentally hang out in the past, use language like: “Here we go again;” “I knew this was going to happen;” “I always fall apart under pressure;” or “Whenever my warm-up is bad, my races/jumps/vaults/throws

are bad;" "I can never beat her/him;" or "I should've done this" or "I shouldn't have done that!" All of these phrases let you know that your focus is in the PAST.

Understand that having a past focus isn't always bad. There are times that you can temporarily go back into the past and it can be both positive and constructive. For example, let's say that you've been in meets before that started off poorly for you yet you were somehow able to mentally and physically turn things around. It's perfectly fine for you to remind yourself of this when you are currently in a similar situation where you've started badly. This kind of time traveling is constructive as long as your focus is immediately brought back to the NOW.

Letting Go of Bad Throw/Jumps/Vaults or Races:

Mistake rituals:

As a track and field athlete it is absolutely critical that you keep your focus of concentration in the NOW of the performance. Dwelling on the past and bad races, poor throws or bad jumps/vaults will distract you from the important task at hand and make you too uptight to perform to your potential. It's imperative that you learn to not clutter your present focus with past mistakes/poor performances. To help you quickly let go of these and bring your focus back into the NOW of your meet you want to develop a "mistake ritual." What's a mistake ritual? It's a series of small steps that you go through mentally and physically in between events/heats/throws or jumps which will help you return your focus to the NOW of the meet.

Typically after a mistake, an athlete will do three things that keep the mistake in the forefront of his/her mind. First, he/she will tend to allow his focus to remain on the bad race/jump or throw. Second, he/she will engage in negative self-talk, angrily putting themselves down for screwing up. Third, and as a result of the first two, the athlete's anxiety level and muscle tension will rise. If you don't immediately interrupt this process, if you allow yourself to stay distracted, upset and physically tight, then the one thing that you can surely count on is that more bad attempts will soon follow. You can effectively counteract these negative effects from a poor performance by developing and practicing a "mistake ritual." Here's an example:

Let's just say that your first heat or jump/vault/throw was really off and you're upset with yourself. You may keep thinking about it and worry that

you might repeat it in the next round. You may get into “shoulding” all over yourself, (“You should’ve run faster! You shouldn’t have run through! You shouldn’t have fouled! You shouldn’t have lost to “X!” That throw should have been so much further!” Etc.)

Now, before you let yourself get totally out of control, you want to use a variation of the following mistake ritual: You bend down and pick up a handful of grass from the infield. You then focus your concentration on the grass instead of the bad race or poor jump/throw. As you do that, you might also begin to change your negative self-talk. “Let it go. It’s in the past. Stay calm. Stay loose. Stay in the NOW!” At the same time that you are countering the negativity, you deliberately begin to slow and deepen your breathing, making sure that your focus goes to the physical sensations of a relaxed inhale and exhale. You do this to physically calm yourself down. When an athlete is uptight and emotions are running in the red zone, getting back in control of your breathing is one of the fastest and best ways to get your head back in the meet.

Now this ritual sounds like it may take several minutes to pull off. In actuality, it’s only a few seconds and it takes place when the action of your event has stopped. When you feel sufficiently calmer, you then take the grass that you’ve been holding in your fist and “let it go,” “throwing it away!” You are symbolically letting go of that bad race/event so that you can get your focus back into the meet and the NOW, ready for your next event.

You can take any piece from this ritual that you’d like. You can add new ones of your own. The point is that you want to develop your own personal ritual that you can use to help you mentally let go of the past and stay in the NOW. Take some time during the week and actually practice this ritual. That way when you’re under the stress of a big meet, you will still be able to regain your focus and composure.

Mistake cues:

As we’ve been discussing, focusing on the past will always set you up for failure. Therefore it is critical that you as a track and field athlete learn to quickly let your missteps and bad events go. Carrying them around with you through a meet will only tend to weigh you down, distract you from your next performance and make you too uptight to perform to your potential. Another way to help you

learn to let go of your mistakes is by developing your own personal “mistake cue.” A mistake cue is a word or phrase that you use the instant that you mess up to remind yourself to quickly let the bad race, poor throw or poor vault go. For example you can use a word like “erase,” “cancel,” “NOW,” or a phrase like “let it go,” or “head in the race/jump/throw.” The exact word or phrase that you use doesn’t really matter. What does matter is that you choose one to remind yourself to leave the past in the past and to get yourself back in the NOW.

Mistake wastebaskets:

Another quick technique that you can use to help you let go of your mistakes is to pick one or more “mistake wastebaskets” anywhere on the track or in the infield. What’s a “mistake wastebasket”? Interesting enough, it’s where you can put your disappointments and frustrations during the meet so that they don’t distract you. So pick one or more spots or objects around the track before the meet begins that will serve as your wastebaskets. They should be something that is easy to see from the track or where you will be performing. You can choose a specific spot in the bleachers, a nearby flagpole, an actual trash can, something in the pit, etc. Once you’ve got your spot you want to make a “deal” with yourself. The deal is that if you mess up, you will deposit that mistake in the “wastebasket” until after the meet. How do you “deposit” the mistake during the meet? You can simply take a quick look at the spot and in that look, you symbolically leave your mistake there.

Mistake folders:

A variation of this technique and one used to help emphasize the point that mistakes are to be thought about and worked on after the meet and in practice, and NEVER during it is to imagine that where ever you keep your bag, you have left your very own “mistake/bad performance folder.” Every time that you screw up, you can quickly glance over at your “folder” and that glancing will symbolically “deposit” your upset/bad performance into the folder to be worked on much later, after the meet.

The fist squeeze technique:

Your mental task after you have a disappointing heat, poor jump/throw, commit a foul or make any mistake is to immediately let it go. Letting go actually has a

physical feeling. Let me demonstrate it to you. Close your eyes right now and gradually tighten your right fist and arm from your fingers all the way to your shoulder. As you gradually tighten your hand and arm from 25% of your strength all the way up to 90% of your strength study the feelings of tension up and down your arm. Hold the tension about 10 seconds and then say the words to yourself, “let go,” and as you do, very slowly begin to let the tension drain out of your right fist and arm. Notice the difference in feeling up and down your arm as the tension slowly drains out. Now repeat this process a second time remembering to keep your eyes closed. Pay particularly close attention to the feelings of letting go as your arm relaxes. Repeat this exercise several times until you can memorize the physical feeling of “letting go.” Practice this exercise a few minutes a day so that you can link the words, “let go” with the actual physical feeling of letting go. In meet situations, after a mistake you can imagine that you’ve just put the mistake in your hand, make a fist, hold the mistake there and then, repeat those words to yourself, “let go.”

You can use this same technique after a particularly bad practice or meet. Imagine that you can symbolically place that bad practice/jump/vault/throw in your right fist. Tighten it to 90% of your tension, hold it for 10 seconds and then repeat, “let go” to yourself. As you do, and you begin to feel the feelings of letting go, imagine that you can also let go of that bad performance and all the feelings associated to it.

The breathing technique:

Mid-way through the meet, in between events, completely shift your focus of concentration out of your head and to your breathing and just follow your breath in and then out. As you exhale, and let go of the breath, imagine that you can also begin to let go of, a little at a time, any disappointment, frustration or anger about what’s happened so far and anything upsetting that might have already happened. With each progressive exhalation imagine that you can get rid of the tension, self-doubts and negative feelings until they become completely replaced by composure, relaxation and confidence.

If track and field athletes aren’t getting themselves trapped in the past, the other mental mistake that they frequently make is to “time travel” into the FUTURE.

When you leave the NOW and go into the FUTURE, you make yourself extremely vulnerable to nervousness and CHOKING! What does it mean to go into the future? You're thinking about the meet's outcome as you're warming up. You're telling yourself that you should be able to win your race, clear 6 feet, vault a PB or beat a specific opponent. You worry about the "what-if's?" "What if we lose?" "What if I get re-injured?" "What if I screw up again?" "What if I run through?" "What if I no-height?" etc.

Now don't get me wrong. There are times when it is perfectly fine to go into the future. When you do mental rehearsal and you "mentally practice" a great throw or technically perfect jump or vault, or "see" yourself staying calm and competing aggressively, you are in the future. This will not get you into trouble as long as your mental sessions are far enough ahead of your event so that they don't get you too nervous. Thinking about your goals in practice, why you're working so hard and what you want to accomplish is going into the future. However, it's perfectly fine to spend some time in practice reminding yourself of why you're working hard. The key point here is that you do NOT EVER want to take your goals with you onto the track for a meet. Keep in mind that focusing in the future on your goals will motivate you in practice to work hard but having that same future focus going into a meet will only serve to get you too uptight to perform your best.

The wise sprinter sayeth:

EVERY MOMENT THAT YOU SPEND PRE-MEET OR DURING THE MEET WHEN YOUR FOCUS IS EITHER IN THE PAST OR THE FUTURE IS A MOMENT WHERE YOU WILL COMPETE FAR BELOW YOUR POTENTIAL. The secret to you consistently performing with intensity and a high level of skill is very simple to understand but harder to do: You must mentally keep yourself in the NOW!

THE MOST IMPORTANT MOMENT IN ANY EVENT IS THE ONE THAT YOU ARE INVOLVED IN RIGHT NOW!

It is critical that you learn to immediately recognize when you are mentally time traveling so that you can very quickly return your focus to the task at hand in the now. If you quickly return your focus to the NOW every time that you drift, then the drifting will not hurt your confidence nor hinder your performance. What WILL

sabotage your performance is when you drift to either the past or future and then you allow yourself to stay there for an extended amount of time.

Developing Awareness of Your Mental Time Traveling

Exercise: Spend time in practice working on staying mentally in the NOW. Pick a five minute period every so often during practice where your goal is to mentally keep your focus on what you are doing in the NOW. Every time that you become aware that your focus has drifted backwards to the past and a mistake or forward to the future and what you might be doing later, quickly return it to the now and what you are doing at that moment. This is an excellent way to build up this very important mental muscle that you need to in order to compete at a championship level. For example, when you stretch at the start of practice keep your focus on the feel of the muscle that you are stretching right now. Breathe into the stretch and as you exhale, imagine that you can let the tension go and relax even more. Then shift to your next muscle. Every time your focus jumps ahead to what will happen in practice, quickly return it to the NOW and the muscle that you are working on.

Leaving Your Bad Meets/Events In The Past – Forgiveness

Want to compete like a champion? Want to go as far as possible in your events? If you do, then you have to learn to be kinder to yourself after you mess up. It's one thing to have high standards and expect yourself to perform to these. It's quite another to put yourself down and emotionally beat yourself up whenever you fail or fall short of your expectations. Getting down on yourself will NEVER make you a better athlete. NEVER! Instead what it will do is further kill your confidence and deflate your motivation. You want to learn to forgive yourself for your failures, losses and mistakes. Use your setbacks to figure out what you need to change. Use your failures as feedback to improve. However, do not waste your valuable emotional energy using your failures and losses as evidence that you aren't good enough. This is a huge mistake that will never motivate you to greatness. Instead it will progressively beat you down. Be a good coach to yourself. Forgive yourself for your humanness. Forgive and then forget your mistakes and failures.

Are You Trying To Compete With Weights On?

One big mental mistake made by athletes at every level is to go into the meet/event carrying expectations. Expectations are related to the meet or event's outcome or your goals. If you want to achieve a certain outcome, qualify for a regional invitational, place first in your event, shut another athlete down, set a school record, have an outstanding performance or beat a certain opponent, then whether you know it or not, you're carrying "heavy" weights into that event if you're thinking about those goals as the performance begins. It's fine for you to have goals and expectations in practice. In fact, your expectations and goals can actually motivate you to go harder and longer in practice. However, a cardinal rule for being a successful track and field athlete is...

Never Take Your Goals With You Onto The Track When It Counts.

Bringing expectations onto the track with you at crunch time will only weigh you down just as sure as if you were wearing 10'lb weights strapped to each ankle and 5'lb'ers strapped to both wrists. You will feel too burdened to compete to your potential. When you make a meet/event too important, when you pressure yourself with "I have to," "I've got to," "I should," or "What if I don't?" then the end result is that you'll compete tight and tentatively. Leave your goals and expectations at home where they belong. Your goals and expectations should only be used as a motivational tool for practice, NOT as a pressure-inducing threat when it counts.

Technique:

Write your goals down on a piece of paper the week or night before a big meet and then put those goals in a drawer, out of sight. Do not look at these goals until after the performance is completely over. This is exactly what you need to do mentally. You need to keep your goals and expectations out of sight when it comes time for that big performance.

step8

Staying Cool & Calm In The Clutch

(Learning how to handle the pressure of big meets)

#1 Understanding The Causes Of Choking And Pre-Meet/Event Nervousness

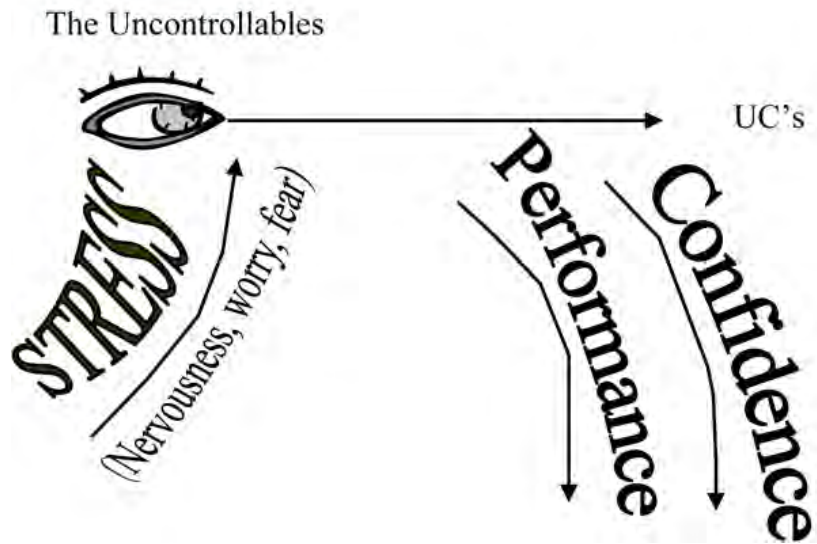
Here's the good news about those pre-meet/event jitters: The importance of the meet/event doesn't make you nervous. How talented or strong your opponents are doesn't make you nervous. How big the crowd is doesn't make you nervous. Who may be in the stands watching you doesn't make you nervous. The event you compete in and what's at stake doesn't make you nervous. Your opponent's record or reputation doesn't make you nervous.

You Make Yourself Nervous

It is NOT outside events that cause you to get so nervous that you can't seem to breathe and feel like you're going to leave your lunch on the track. Instead, it's what you say to yourself and focus on both before and during your performances that's the real culprit here. Nervousness comes from inside, not outside of us. This is the good news because you can learn to control what you think about and focus on before and during your meets. It's the good news because with a little bit of practice, you can learn how to calm yourself down under big meet pressure.

The UC's As The Main Cause Of Runaway Nerves

When you go into a meet or your event focusing on one or more UC's ("uncontrollables"), three things will always happen to you. First, you will begin to get nervous and physically tense. Second, you will lose your confidence. Third, and as a direct result of these first two, your performance will quickly "head south," down the proverbial tubes. An uncontrollable is any factor before or during



your event that is directly out of your control. Uncontrollables are mental traps. They are lying in wait for you and every other track and field athlete at that meet/invitational. The bigger the competition, the more likelihood there'll be that you will fall into them. How do you avoid a trap? YOU HAVE TO SEE IT! YOU HAVE TO KNOW IT'S THERE! You have to know what the uncontrollables are and especially the ones that have gotten to you in the past.

Getting To Know Your "UC's"

Exercise:

Below is a list of some typical uncontrollables. Go through the list and put an asterisk next to each UC that has gotten to you in previous pressured situations. When you're finished, take a piece of paper and list all the uc's that you starred. Next, take this list and post it in a highly visible place in your room. Why would you want to do that? Isn't that sort of negative? If the uncontrollables are traps and the only way to avoid a trap is to be able to "see" it ahead of time, then having such a list will keep you exquisitely aware of what you should stay away from concentration-wise:

The UC'S

How big the meet/invitational is

Your teammates' performances and how well they might be doing

Your opponent – His/her size, strength, speed, reputation, aggressiveness, etc.

Your opponent's attitude/cockiness

The officiating

The weather (wind, sun, temperature, hot/cold, etc.

The crowd/spectators

Your coach and what he/she says to you before and after your events

How long you have to wait before your event and in between events.

How you feel that day (both physically and emotionally, i.e. sickness, fatigue, injury, etc.)

The kind of warm-up you had

Other people's expectations of you (How they will think of or see you)

What your parents will think or say about how you performed

Who's in particular is watching you

Anything related to the FUTURE and outcome like winning, placing, time, distance, height you want to clear, etc.

Anything in the PAST (mistakes, last meet, missed opportunity, etc.

The unexpected (delays, etc.)

Academic/personal stuff outside of track and field, i.e. pressure for papers/tests

Injuries that occur during the meet

Etc.

Important Note:

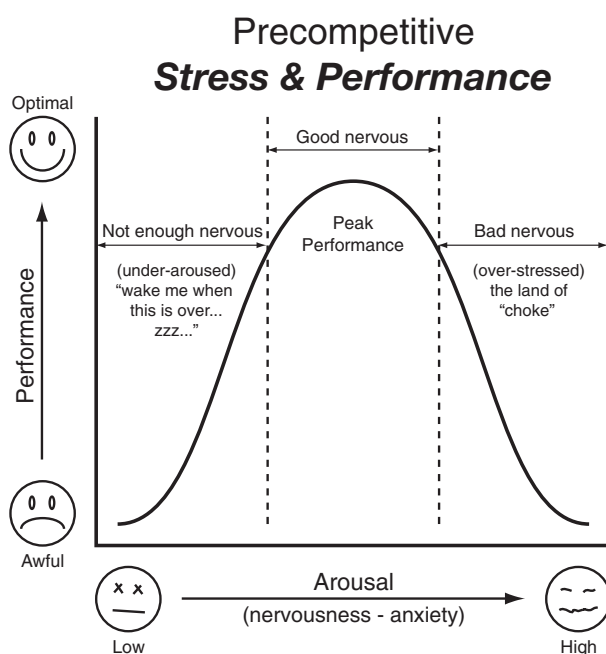
Keep in mind that focusing on an uncontrollable by itself won't get you into trouble. What WILL get you into performance hot water is focusing on an uncontrollable and NOT immediately returning your concentration to those things that you CAN control. It is perfectly natural to get periodically knocked off balance by the uc's. When this does happen, be sure that you:

#1 Recognize That What You Are Now Focusing On Is An Uncontrollable;

#2 Quickly And Gently Return Your Focus Back To What You Can Control And What's Important At That Moment.

Remember, the one thing that you can ALWAYS learn to control is how YOU CHOOSE to react to the uncontrollables.

TO STAY CALM UNDER PRESSURE, BE SURE THAT YOU SHIFT YOUR FOCUS AWAY FROM THE "UNCONTROLLABLES."



#2 Reading Your Level Of Pre-Meet Nervousness/Excitement

How excited or nervous you are before your meets/events will make or break how well you perform. Since the secret to competing well under pressure is to stay loose and relaxed, your ability to consistently do this is absolutely critical to making your track and field dreams come true. "Reading" your level of pre-performance excitement/nervousness is an important first step in getting yourself back in control and performing to your potential. (see figure #6 Performance arousal scale/curve)

In figure #6 you can see that as you move from left to right on the horizontal nervousness/excitement scale your level of pre-performance physiological arousal

(nervousness) increases from being completely relaxed or under-aroused on the far left to being completely freaked out or over-aroused on the far right. The vertical axis measures how well you're performing. When you're low on the graph, you're performing badly and when you're high on the graph, you're walking on water. As the diagram illustrates there are three basic levels of pre-meet/event nervousness/excitement: "not enough nervous"; "good nervous"; or "bad nervous." Understand that it is IMPOSSIBLE to compete to your potential when you are in "not enough" or "bad nervous." If you go into a meet overconfident or too cocky, the resultant "not enough nervous" will insure that your performance will be flat. If, on the other hand you go into the meet dreading it, worried about losing, failing, feeling too much pressure or in other ways over-aroused, the resultant tight muscles will insure that you choke badly.

Performing your best when it counts the most demands that you be in "good nervous" right before the start. "Good nervous" is actually not nervousness at all but a feeling of being excited, anticipating the event and feeling a sense of confidence that you're up to the challenge while at the same time, still maintaining a relaxed looseness.

There are 3 primary ways that you "read" your level of pre-performance nervousness:

#1 PHYSICALLY in how you FEEL in your BODY

#2 MENTALLY in how you THINK and what you FOCUS on

#3 BEHAVIORALLY in how you ACT

"Good," "bad" and "not enough nervous" look and feel different from each other. If you can learn to recognize these differences and your particular signs of "good", "bad" and, when appropriate "not enough" nervous, then you are one step closer to learning to consistently stay cool and calm in the clutch. The following is a list of some of the general signs of increased nervousness (either "good" or "bad nervous") in our three main categories:

<u>Physically</u>	<u>Mentally</u>	<u>Behaviorally</u>
Increased heart & pulse	Thinking speeds up	Rituals
Faster/shallow breathing	Negative thinking	Mood swings
Tighter muscles	Focus narrows	Getting “hyper”
Cold hands/feet	Increased self-doubts	“motor mouth”
Dry mouth	Critical of self/others	quiet
Frequent yawning	Forgetting	no movement
Heaviness in limbs	Negative images	nervous habits
Energy/lightness	The “what if’s”	superstitions
Fatigue	Getting “spacey”	“the giggles”
Nausea	Positive/negative attitude	hostility
Vomiting	mental rehearsal	withdrawal
Frequent urinating	increased confidence	
“The runs”	hang onto mistakes	
increased sweating	quickly let mistakes go	

Learning To “Read” Your Own Personal Signs

Exercise: Think back to several really great past performances. These reflect a state of “good nervous.” Using Worksheet #7 and the above three columns as a guide, try to recall in as much detail as possible exactly how you felt physically, what you thought about/focused on, and how you acted before each of these top performances. Next compare all your responses and you should discover your typical signs of “good nervous.” Now do the same for several sub-par performances using Worksheet #6. (most bad performances are a direct result of too much excitement or “bad nervous” rather than a state of “not enough nervous.”) Again, use the three categories to help you get specific about what your “bad” or “not enough nervous” looked like. Once you’ve reviewed several bad performances in this way, see if you can discover any patterns in how you experienced “bad” or, when applicable, “not enough nervous.” These patterns will reflect your typical

signs of “bad (or not enough) nervous.”

#3 Acting As If

The “ACT AS IF” strategy is one of the more important mental toughness techniques to help you get yourself back in control when the pressure is turned way up high and the garbage is hitting the fan. ACT AS IF is based on the principle:

IF YOU ACT THE WAY THAT YOU WANT TO FEEL, SOON YOU WILL BEGIN TO FEEL THE WAY THAT YOU ACT.

The way that you feel on the inside, your EMOTIONS, are always determined by how you act on the outside, your MOTIONS. In other words the way that you physically carry yourself, your posture, facial expression, physical gestures, walk, head and shoulders position will ultimately affect and determine how you end up feeling emotionally. After a disappointing loss or poor performance, many track and field athletes will hang their head, drop their shoulders, put a disgusted or down look upon their face and drag their feet around. However, when you ACT discouraged and down, when you act like a loser, you will begin to FEEL even more bummed out. Instead you want to ACT AS IF. You want to keep your feelings/emotions INSIDE and on the OUTSIDE you want to act like everything is fine.

Keep in mind that ACTING AS IF has absolutely nothing to do with moving your lips or trying to trick or convince yourself that everything is fine. Everything isn't fine and it's OK to acknowledge that fact on the INSIDE. However, on the OUTSIDE you want to physically act like you're in control by keeping your head and shoulders up, a smile or neutral expression on your face and maintaining a spring in your step and energy in your behaviors.

ACTING AS IF is what I call a WINNER'S FALL BACK POSITION. When a winner is exhausted, she will physically act like she has a ton of energy. When a winner is nervous, she'll physically act calm. When a winner is discouraged or down she will act as if she's up. Acting as if is the FAKE IT 'TIL YOU MAKE IT STRATEGY where you are deliberately TELLING A LIE WITH YOUR BODY!!! So pre-meet/event, when you can feel your lunch coming up and you can't seem to stop your knees from knocking together, ACT AS IF you are calm and in control.

Deliberately act exactly the way that you would as if you were in “good nervous.” If before all your great performances you were jumping around, laughing and joking with your friends, then get off your butt and start doing that, even if you have to pretend!

One of the main reasons that ACTING AS IF is such an important strategy is because track and field, like every other sport has a significant psychological component to the competition. Your events are not just simply physical contests where someone has to run faster, jump higher or throw farther than the competition. These physical performances are affected by the psychological and the psychological always gets communicated physically!

For example, If you hang your head after a bad first jump/vault or throw, if you show your upset and disgust after a bad heat or when the breaks seem to go against you, then you are inadvertently giving your opponents a psychological and emotional boost by “acting like” a loser.

Anytime you show your negative emotions either by dropping your shoulders, throwing your hands up in disgust or dropping your head, you are letting your opponent know that you are upset and therefore vulnerable. You are telling your opponent, “I’m in trouble!” It’s like being in a high stakes poker game but continually showing your cards to your opponent. When you do that, you’ll end up losing your shirt! When things go against you, you want to show your opponent absolutely nothing. You want to keep a neutral or intense expression on your face and ACT AS IF nothing has happened. When your opponent sees that time after time over the course of the meet that you have no negative reaction when things go against you, it will ultimately have an intimidating effect on him/her.

So keep your cards to yourself when you compete. ACT LIKE A WINNER all the time out there. Keep your head up, your shoulders square and speed in your step whenever things go wrong. Do not let on that you may be feeling down or discouraged inside. On the outside always show your opponent the behavior of a champion.

Staying Calm In The Clutch: Relaxation Techniques

Slow And Deepen Your Breathing

When you're nervous, your breathing speeds up and gets faster. This kind of shallow, rapid breathing will tighten your muscles and tire you out prematurely, causing you to slow down on the track and perform poorly. To help you quickly calm yourself down under pressure you must learn to control the depth and rate of your breathing. Sit quietly in a room free from distractions and put your concentration on your diaphragm or lower belly. Inhale very, very slowly focusing on your lower belly filling up like a balloon. At the top of your breath, when you can't take in any more air, pause for a slow count of 3 or 4. Then exhale, much slower than normal and feel your lower belly deflate. Repeat this sequence and imagine that as you inhale, you are completely surrounded by a white cloud. The cloud is filled with fresh oxygen, energy, confidence, calmness, strength, endurance, etc. As you inhale very slowly and feel your diaphragm rise, watch that cloud go in through your nose. At the top of your breath when you can't take in any more, pause and as you count slowly to 3 or 4, imagine that you can experience all that good stuff that you inhaled moving throughout your body. As you exhale slowly and feel your belly fall, imagine that you can watch that cloud come out from the tip of your nose, as you get rid of any negative energy, fatigue, self-doubts, stress, etc. Notice that as you exhale, the cloud now comes out a much darker color like black or brown. Repeat 8 – 10 of these slow, diaphragmatic

breaths being sure to concentrate on the feeling of the air coming in and going out and “watching” in your mind's eye, the cloud coming in and going out.

NOTE: Like all the exercises and techniques in this workbook, consistent practice of this breathing technique will enable you to confidently rely on it at pressured situations. Two or more of these diaphragmatic breaths right before your event will help you calm down and get yourself back into “good nervous.”

#6 Stretch

Stretching is an easy and effective way to quickly calm yourself down pre-meet/pre-event. When done the correct way, stretching will loosen your muscles and provide you with a calming focal point where you can rest your concentration. The key to correct pre-meet/event stretching is very simple. Make sure that as you physically stretch, your focus of concentration is completely on what you are doing

in that moment and on the feeling of the stretching. It does you absolutely no good to stretch pre-meet/event if, while you stretch you're allowing your concentration to wander to your opponent, the outcome of the meet or anything that could go wrong. Focus on the stretch while you stretch. In other words, stay in the "here & now."

#7 Tighten & Release

Another quick technique to help you physically loosen up right before that big meet/event is an abbreviation of the progressive muscle relaxation exercise. It involves focusing on any part of you that feels tight at the moment and deliberately tightening it even more for a short amount of time before then releasing the tension. For example, let's say that a few minutes before your race, throw or jump you notice tension up and down your legs, deliberately tighten those already tense muscles even more. Hold the muscle tension for 10 seconds and as you do so, be sure that your concentration is on the feeling of the tension in your leg muscles. Then say to yourself, "let go," and as you do, slowly release all the muscle tension in that area. Then, repeat the sequence of deliberately tightening the muscles, holding the tension for 10 seconds and releasing. This is a very quick and effective way for you to loosen yourself up right before that big event.

#8 Using Imagery For Relaxation

You can also effectively calm yourself down by using your imagination to mentally take yourself to a calm, safe place. Sit quietly, close your eyes and imagine yourself going to a totally relaxing place like a favorite beach, mountainside, woods or vacation spot. Experience yourself comfortably enjoying this place in as much detail as possible, seeing, hearing and feeling everything that you would as if you were actually there. Allow yourself to stay in this calming place for 5 – 10 minutes at a time until you feel calm, relaxed and in control. Regular "visits" to this mental "relaxation room" will make it available to you under pressure, right before that big competition and right before your event. However, if you never consistently practice this exercise at home when you're completely relaxed, then you'll find that it won't be "open" and available for you when you need it the most.

step9

Preparing Yourself To Compete Like A Champion When It Counts The Most

Using Mental Rehearsal

Mental rehearsal is a very simple, yet powerful mental skill that you can regularly use to help you stay calm under competitive pressure, build confidence, quickly let go of mistakes and bad breaks and more effectively play to your potential. Mental rehearsal or visualization is nothing more than deliberate mental practice where you imagine, in vivid detail, (seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling): running the perfect race (or whatever your event is) from your warm-up and pre-race ritual, right through to crossing the finish line, including feelings of celebration and accomplishment at the very end.

Mental rehearsal works because what you vividly imagine stimulates the nerve-muscle connections involved in the actual movements. Repetitive stimulation of these connections forms a pathway for your muscles to follow once the actual movements are undertaken. In this way, mental rehearsal, when it's properly done leaves you with a confident feeling of preparedness, like you've already been there. With sufficient practice, you can fine-tune this mental skill to the point where you can consistently raise the level of your performance.

Follow these simple guidelines to help you master the skill of mental rehearsal and better prepare you for those high pressured situations.

1. Always start your imagery sessions with several minutes of relaxation. Your imagery will be far more effective when you're completely relaxed. (DO NOT do imagery when you're anxious)

2. Do NOT use mental rehearsal too close to the actual start of your event. If you do, you will make yourself too nervous to perform your best. Some athletes need to stop a day or two before the meet. Others can use imagery right up until an hour or so before the actual start of their event. Experiment to discover which time frame works best for you.
3. Make your imagery as vivid and detailed as possible including pictures, sounds, muscle feelings and even smells.
4. Have a specific goal in mind for your mental rehearsal sessions. For example, if you are easily intimidated and knocked off balance because you focus too much on your opponents, then “practice” staying focused on you and your own performance.
5. Try to FEEL what you’d be feeling as if you were actually in the event. Your meet imagery will be much more effective if you can step into the physical feelings of the competitiveness and “practice” these.
6. Have a beginning, middle and end to each of your sessions. The beginning can involve traveling to the meet, your warm-up, pre-event ritual, the start and then finish of each race, jump or throw.
7. Make your mental rehearsal sessions short. (10 minutes at the most including a 4-5 minute period of relaxation).
8. Always try to imagine what you want to have happen and how you want to feel, NOT what you’re afraid will happen or don’t want.
9. If your images turn negative at any point in your session, be patient and “rewind” them, replaying the scene again and again until they turn out the way that you want them to.
10. Keep in mind that mental rehearsal is a learned skill. In the beginning, you may close your eyes and see nothing but a blank slate. Be patient and keep practicing. Just because you can’t consciously see, feel or hear anything doesn’t mean that your imagery isn’t working. You are always making images unconsciously and these images are just as powerful and effective as the ones that you are consciously aware of. When you go to do an imagery session and

can't "see" or "feel" anything, just think your way through what you want to be going on in as much detail as possible.

Using "Coping Imagery" To Effectively Handle Stressful Situations Before And During Your Meets

Mental rehearsal is a wonderful tool to help you learn to stay calm under pressure and to build confidence in your ability to handle stressors that in the past might have gotten you too nervous to perform your best. Let's say, for example, that seeing a certain opponent that you have to match up against would freak you out and undermine your confidence. Use your mental rehearsal session to vividly imagine yourself staying calm, cool and focused in this situation and then competing against him/her confidently. Similarly, if you tend to get too upset after a bad first heat or attempt, then mentally practice refocusing yourself immediately after this first sub-par effort and performing in your next heat/race or in your second attempt with renewed concentration and intensity. If your problem is one of being too nervous pre-event, then mentally practice staying relaxed and in control right before the start of that big event, and then going out there and competing strong, loose and relaxed.



step 10

Utilizing A “Championship Meet Plan” To Compete Like A Champion

Perhaps one of the biggest mental mistakes that track and field athletes make at their more important competitions is to take the wrong goals with them. What are the wrong goals? Anything related to outcome like, WINNING, POINT STANDINGS, NEEDING TO TURN IN A PERSONAL BEST, WANTING TO BEAT A PARTICULAR OPPONENT, WANTING TO PROVE TO THE COACH THAT YOU DESERVE TO BE ON THE SQUAD, etc. Outcome goals, as we’ve discussed throughout this workbook tend to distract you from the task at hand and get you too nervous and physically tight to compete your best. Remember, your outcome goals are strictly a motivational tool for practice only! To perform your best when it counts the most you must learn to “carry” different goals onto the track with you. These goals, when focused on and accomplished, will GUARANTEE that you’ll achieve your outcome goals. These goals make up what I call a championship meet plan.

What is a championship meet plan? A championship meet plan is like a RECIPE FOR PEAK PERFORMANCE. Like any recipe, it has specific ingredients that must be utilized in order to achieve the desired outcome. Like any recipe, when some of these “ingredients” are omitted, what you end up with will leave you with a “nasty taste” in your mouth! Look over the following mini-goals of this basic CHAMPIONSHIP MEET PLAN and see which ones will help you cook up one mean performance:

The Championship Meet Plan

1. Stay Loose & Relaxed

The secret to competing your best when it counts the most lies in your ability to stay mentally and physically loose under pressure. Excessive premeet/event nervousness is the number one cause of choking and bad performance. Therefore it is absolutely critical that you have several relaxation tools in your mental toughness toolbox. Simply put, you need to know HOW to relax when the competitive pressure is turned up high. Things you can do pre-meet/event to actually achieve this state of relaxation: Control your breathing; stretch; listen to music; distract yourself with light or funny conversation with teammates; Do NOT focus on the importance of the meet/event; Use relaxation techniques. (See section, "Staying cool and calm in the clutch" for these).

2. Have Fun

One oftentimes overlooked, but critical ingredient in great performances is FUN! If you are having fun BEFORE and WHILE you compete, then chances are good that you will remain loose enough to perform your best. Too many athletes wait until after the meet before deciding whether they had fun or not, i.e. "When I place first or second, that's fun," or "Let me beat my personal best and then I'll have fun," or "Let me clear 6'6" in high jump or 12" in pole vault" and then I'll enjoy myself!" If you have to wait until after the outcome of the meet before you can decide whether you've had fun or not, then you've got it BACKWARDS! You can't compete well at ANY LEVEL unless you're having fun FIRST! FUN IS AN ABSOLUTE MUST IN ORDER FOR YOU TO DO YOUR BEST. If you're NOT having fun, then you won't perform well. So before your meet/event, let yourself get into the challenge. Get into hanging with your friends, laughing and joking. Whatever is fun for you at the meet then you want to make sure that you're doing it and enjoying yourself in the process.

3. Stay Focused In The "Now"

You perform your best when you can keep your concentration in the "now," on the event that you're involved in at that moment. If you are in the past or the future before or during an event, then you will always be off. The only mental time

zone where you have access to all your skills, strength and speed is the NOW. Remember, THE MOST IMPORTANT MOMENT IN ANY EVENT IS THE ONE THAT YOU'RE INVOLVED WITH RIGHT NOW!

4. When You “Time Travel” (Past Or Future) Recognize That You’ve Left The Now And Quickly And Gently Bring Your Focus Back To The Now

Remember, drifting won't hurt you as long as you stay on top of it. When your focus lags behind or jumps ahead, quickly return it to the now. Each moment that you compete where your focus is in the past or the future is a moment that you're handicapping yourself, a moment that you're competing way below your abilities!

5. Run Your Own Race/Focus On You

Want to beat that annoying opponent? Want to perform to the extent that you're fully capable of? If you do, then you'll stay focused on YOU and YOUR own performance. Being overly concerned with opponents, teammates, the coaches, the crowd or what other people may think about you will mentally take you out of your event and cause you to compete poorly. Focus on YOUR PERFORMANCE and NO ONE ELSE!

6. When Your Focus Leaves You, Recognize You're Drifting And Quickly And Gently Bring Your Focus Back To You

If you find yourself preoccupied with someone else before or during your event(s), your immediate job is to catch yourself and quickly return your focus back to what you're doing in the moment. You can't compete well in track and field if you're distracted by those around you.

7. Keep Track Of The “UC's” (Uncontrollables)

Focusing on any uncontrollable either before or during your performance will get you uptight, undermine your self-confidence and ruin your event. Your job going into those high pressured situations is to know what your “UC'S” are and to make sure that your focus stays away from them. If you should find yourself concentrating on an uncontrollable, quickly return your focus to what you are doing. Remember, you can always control how YOU CHOOSE to react to any uncontrollable.

8. Use Last Minute Negative Thinking And Self-Doubts As A Neutral Signal To Relax And Refocus

Remember, last minute doubts and negativity are quite normal. When you hear their nasty little chatter in your ears right before the start of the meet/event RELAX!!!! Do NOT engage the negativity. Instead, immediately refocus your concentration on the task at hand. Allowing yourself to “jump in” to the negative thoughts will tend to get you “emotionally hijacked.” Negative thinking and doubts are nothing more than brain wave activity. They are NOT a prediction of what will happen. Change the channel and refocus on the task at hand.

9. Don't Think, Just Perform

Performing well in track and field is all about feel, flow and reacting and NOT about thinking. Thinking is hazardous to your health as an athlete. You can't think your way through a great 100 meter dash or a PB throw. You have to get out of your own way and allow your muscle memory and instincts to take over. Before that big event, reassure yourself that you've paid your physical dues, that you've done everything that you can possibly do to prepare and then completely put your concentration on FEEL and REACT. Thinking always distracts you from the important task at hand and slows you down.

10. Trust And Let It Happen

If you have made an honest investment in your training, then that great race or field event that you so desperately want is already inside of you as you read these words. How do you get that great performance to come out? You have to relax, trust your training, trust your coaching, trust your muscle memory and just let the performance come to you. You don't need to force it. Just let it flow.

11. Use Focal Points Before And During Your Event

Since quickly catching your drifting focus and bringing it back is so important to mental toughness, it is absolutely critical that you have specific focal points that you can return your concentration to. Know ahead of time what your pre-meet and during meet focal points are. Have a specific pre-event ritual picked out ahead of time that you feel comfortable using. Your ritual provides you with pre-event focal points that you can regularly use to keep yourself distracted from the distractions.

12. Forgive Yourself For Your Mistakes And Bad Performances, Learn From Them And Leave Them In The Past

Understand that your success as an athlete is ultimately based upon your failures. You can NOT become a champion without failing. Therefore, how you handle your failures is absolutely critical to how successful you'll ultimately become. When you have a poor performance, look for what you did wrong. DON'T waste your time and energy beating yourself up! Getting down on yourself has no constructive value whatsoever. Instead, learn from your mistakes, forgive yourself for being human and then leave the bad performance in the PAST where it belongs!

Using The Championship Meet Plan

Choose all or any number of the above goals that fit for you. Write them down on a piece of paper. Make several copies. Put one up on your wall or mirror in your bedroom, put one inside your locker and keep one in your track bag. Look at these goals before your meets. Remember their purpose. The meet plan is designed to help you stay focused on what's important. After a meet, take a few minutes to evaluate your performance in relation to this meet plan. That is, ask yourself, "on a scale of 1 – 10, where 1 = not at all and 10 = a perfect job, how well did I accomplish each goal?" Answers of 7- 8 or less indicate the need for more improvement on that particular goal for your next performance. Answers of 9 or 10 indicate that you executed that particular goal quite effectively. Remember, the way to get to that great performance is by following the goals of the CHAMPIONSHIP MEET PLAN.

Conclusion

Once you get to that big meet, how well you perform depends almost entirely on how mentally tough you are. Remember what I said when we started this workbook: “In meet performance, track and field is 95% mental and 5% physical.” Don’t leave this all-important mental side of your performance to chance. Your mind is far too powerful a force to leave untrained! Harness the awesome power of your mind today by beginning to systematically work on developing mental toughness. Use this workbook to strengthen your mental muscles, build your self-confidence and help you stay cool and calm in the clutch. Remember, you can’t be a great track and field competitor without using your head. So start today to systematically develop the mind of a champion.



Worksheet #1
Self-talk and bad performances
(Bad meet #1)

What was your self-talk/thoughts ...

1. ...the day of the meet?
2. ...during your warm-up?
3. ...just before your event started?
4. ...after you lost an event?
5. ...after a poor race/throw/jump?

6. ...when a teammate or coach yelled at you?

7. ...when something went against you?

8. ...against an overly confident, trash talking opponent?

9. ...During your event?

10. ...If your team lost the race/meet?

Worksheet #1
Self-talk and bad performances
(Bad meet #2)

What was your self-talk/thoughts ...

1. ...the day of the meet?
2. ...during your warm-up?
3. ...just before your event started?
4. ...after you lost an event?
5. ...after a poor race/jump/throw?

6. ...when a teammate or coach yelled at you?
7. ...when something went against you?
8. ...against an overly confident, trash talking opponent?
9. ...during your event?
10. ...If your team lost the race/meet?

Worksheet #1
Self-talk and bad performances
(Bad meet #3)

What was your self-talk/thoughts ...

1. ...the day of the meet?
2. ...during your warm-up?
3. ...just before the event started?
4. ...after you lost an event?
5. ...after a poor race/jump/throw?

6. ...when a teammate or coach yelled at you?

7. ...when something went against you?

8. ...against an overly confident, trash talking opponent?

9. ...During your event?

10. ...If your team lost the race/meet?

Worksheet #2
Self-talk and good performances
(Good meet #1)

What were your self-talk/thoughts...

1. ...the day of the meet?
2. ...during your warm-up?
3. ...just before the event started?
4. ...after you lost an event?
5. ...after a poor race/jump/throw?

6. ...when a teammate or coach yelled at you?

7. ...when something went against you?

8. ...against an overly confident, trash talking opponent?

9. ...during your event?

10. ...If your team lost the race/meet?

Worksheet #2
Self-talk and good performances
(Good meet #2)

What were your self-talk/thoughts...

1. ...the day of the meet?
2. ...during your warm-up?
3. ...just before the event started?
4. ...after you lost an event?
5. ...after a poor race/jump/throw?

6. ...when a teammate or coach yelled at you?

7. ...when something went against you?

8. ...against an overly confident, trash talking opponent?

9. ...during your event?

10. ...If your team lost the race/meet?

Worksheet #2
Self-talk and good performances
(Good meet #3)

What were your self-talk/thoughts...

1. ...the day of the meet?
2. ...during your warm-up?
3. ...just before the event started?
4. ...after you lost an event?
5. ...after a poor race/jump/throw?

6. ...when a teammate or coach yelled at you?

7. ...when something went against you?

8. ...against an overly confident, trash talking opponent?

9. ...During your event?

10. ...If your team lost the race/meet?

Worksheet #3
Concentration and good performances
(Good meet #1)

Where was your focus of concentration...

1. ...the day of the meet?
2. ...during warm-up?
3. ...just before the event started?
4. ...after a poor race/jump/throw?
5. ...after you turned in a great performance?
6. ...when the officials made bad calls?

7. ...after getting beaten by your opponent?

8. ...In between events?

9. ...when you competed in a crucial event?

10. ...against a strong, very talented opponent?

11. ...in the meet's last event?

12. ...if the coach yelled at you?

Worksheet #3
Concentration and good performances
(Good meet #2)

Where was your focus of concentration...

1. ...the day of the meet?
2. ...during warm-up?
3. ...just before the event started?
4. ...after a poor race/jump/throw?
5. ...after you turned in a great performance?
6. ...when the officials made bad calls?

7. ...after getting beaten by your opponent?

8. ...In between events?

9. ...when you competed in a crucial event?

10. ...against a strong, very talented opponent?

11. ...in the meet's last event?

12. ...If the coach yelled at you?

Worksheet #3
Concentration and good performances
(Good meet #3)

Where was your focus of concentration...

1. ...the day of the meet?
2. ...during warm-up?
3. ...just before the event started?
4. ...after a poor race/jump/throw?
5. ...after you turned in a great performance?
6. ...when the officials made bad calls?

7. ...after getting beaten by your opponent?

8. ...in between events?

9. ...when you competed in a crucial event?

10. ...in the meet's last event?

11. ...against a strong, very talented opponent?

12....If the coach yelled at you?

Worksheet #4**Concentration and bad performances****(Bad meet #1)**

Where was your focus of concentration...

1. ...the day of the meet?
2. ...during warm-up?
3. ...just before the event started?
4. ...after a poor race/jump/throw?
5. ...after you turned in a great performance?
6. ...when the officials made bad calls?

7. ...after getting beaten by your opponent?

8. ...In between events?

9. ...when you competed in a crucial event?

10. ...In the meet's last event?

11. ...against a strong, very talented opponent?

12. ...If the coach yelled at you?

Worksheet #4
Concentration and bad performances
(Bad meet #2)

Where was your focus of concentration...

1. ...the day of the meet?
2. ...during warm-up?
3. ...just before the event started?
4. ...after a poor race/jump/throw?
5. ...after you turned in a great performance?
6. ...when the officials made bad calls?

7. ...after getting beaten by your opponent?

8. ...In between events?

9. ...when you competed in a crucial event?

10. ...In the meet's last event?

11. ...against a strong, very talented opponent?

12. ...if the coach yelled at you?

Worksheet #4
Concentration and bad performances
(Bad meet #3)

Where was your focus of concentration...

1. ...the day of the meet?
2. ...during warm-up?
3. ...just before the event started?
4. ...after a poor race/jump/throw?
5. ...after you turned in a great performance?
6. ...when the officials made bad calls?

7. ...after getting beaten by your opponent?

8. ...In between events?

9. ...when you competed in a crucial event?

10. ...In the meet's last event?

11. ...against a strong, very talented opponent?

12. ...if the coach yelled at you?

Worksheet #5

Do you perform better in practice than you do in competitions?

(Compare and contrast)

Practice meets

What do you tend to focus on...

1. ...before you get to the practice/meet?

2. ...during warm-ups?

3. ...just before the start of performance?

4. ...when you begin to feel tired?

5. ...when you mess up?

6. ...when you get beaten ?

7. ...when the coach criticizes you?

8. ...How much do you concentrate on other athletes?

9. ...How much does your focus drift to the future & outcome?

10. ...How much do you compare yourself with others?

11. ...How much time do you spend focusing on what you think you are doing badly?

12. ...How easily distracted are you?

Worksheet #6
Signs of good nervous

Great meet #1

Great meet #2

Physical signs
(in body)

Physical signs

Mental signs
(thinking/focusing)

Mental signs

Behavioral signs
(how I acted pre-meet)

Behavioral signs

Worksheet #7
Signs of bad (or not enough) nervous

Bad meet #1

Bad meet #2

Physical signs
(in body)

Physical signs

Mental signs
(thinking/focusing)

Mental signs

Behavioral signs
(how I acted pre-meet)

Behavioral signs

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