



Mental Training Can Give Weekend Warriors Olympic Edge

Wednesday, February 15, 2006

By Denise Mann, MS



Before two-time Olympic figure skater Randy Gardner could nail the throw triple salchow with his partner, Tai Babilonia, he had to see the complicated jump and landing in his mind.

"It worked almost instantaneously," the world pair champion, U.S. National pair champion and Los Angeles-based coach and choreographer tells WebMD. "Once you see it in your head, you can do it."

Gardner and other elite athletes -- including those now competing in the XX Olympic Winter Games in Turin, Italy -- often use visualization, goal setting, and refocusing to help them mentally prepare for important events. Some of these same techniques can also help weekend warriors improve their tennis game and help a person slim down, experts tell WebMD.

Emotional Conditioning

Though physical training and conditioning are obviously important to performance, emotional conditioning or mental-skills training can often help athletes stand out.

"Emotional conditioning is crucial because once you get to any level in sport -- whether high school, division I collegiate, the nationals, the Olympics, or even as a weekend warrior -- everyone is pretty equal physically. It's those who can handle noise, stress, pressure, and distraction who are the ones that win," says Jenny Susser, PhD, a sports psychologist in the Women's Sports Medicine Center at the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City.

"Emotional conditioning is the watchword of the universe," says Steven Ungerleider, PhD, author of *Mental Training for Peak Performance: Top Athletes Reveal the Mind Exercises They Use to Excel*. "It's just as important as physical training," says Ungerleider, who is also a psychologist based in Eugene, Ore.

"Each athlete is unique in the way that they go about mental preparation," explains Mark Hogue, PsyD, clinical psychologist and sports psychologist at Northshore Psychological Associates in Erie, Pa. "Athletes certainly do a great deal of physical preparation. And to reach an elite status in sport, they must do a great deal with mental preparation as well."

"Athletes that participate in mental preparation, rehearsal, and skills training tend to achieve a higher level of the elite status," Hogue says.

Tricks of the Trade

The visualization technique that Gardner describes is a staple in most emotional conditioning programs. But it's also important to learn how to pick up on the correct cues, says Dan G. Tripps, PhD. Tripps is director of the Master's in Sports Administration and Leadership program at the Center for the Study of Sport at Seattle University in Washington.

"In a figure skating event, you need to concentrate on your partner and not pay attention to the crowd or the behavior of the judges," he says. "It's about narrowing your focus."

Anxiety, worry, doubts, fears, or butterflies can be reduced with this technique, he says.

Mental training also helps eliminate the element of surprise, he explains.

"It can throw you when your opponent does something that you don't expect or when your body has an unusual reaction. But if you mentally plan for surprises -- and execute them in visualization exercises -- then you are not flustered or confused by something that happens that's out of character," he says. For example, "if you fall in a preliminary skating run, you can remain poised -- then refocus and perform better during the next important round," Tripps says.

Strengthening the 'Focus Muscle'

"You need to work to strengthen your 'focus muscle' and figure out what is distracting you," Susser says. Some distractions are positive, she adds, but an athlete needs to determine what distracts him or her negatively and come up with a way to combat it -- whether by tying their focus to their breathing or to somebody else on the team.

How can a person strengthen his focus muscle?

"If an athlete gets sidetracked by the crowd, I would work with the athlete on how to tune out the crowd and change their focus to the skates or the ice," she says. The goal is to "switch it to something that will improve your performance instead of distract you and decrease your performance."

Setting Goals

Goal setting is key, whether you are Michelle Kwan or just want to play some golf over the weekend, Susser says.

"The No. 1 thing is to have a good, realistic goal," Susser tells WebMD. "You want it to be S-M-A-R-T." That stands for specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic (but challenging) and time-sensitive.

"A goal is a road map. It's also a slam dunk in setting yourself up for success," she says.

"For the weekend warrior, goal setting and feedback-reward mechanisms that maintain motivation are important," Tripps agrees.

"Focus on process goals such as what you need to do to be proficient or what you need to do to have the desired outcome," he says. For example, "don't worry about wearing a size 12 instead of a size 16. Instead think about what you would need to do to wear a size 12," he says. That's a process goal.

Establishing Rewards

"Come up with things that tie in rewards to goals like an athlete would," he says, "For an athlete, awards are winning, medals, and newspaper coverage. But for the average person it can be a day at the movies with friends."

Expectation management is another important tool. "If you take a couple of minutes to mentally prepare yourself -- that can help," Susser says. "The killer piece for a weekend warrior is expectation. It's really hard to go back after 20 years and play a sport again ... and people don't prepare for that and get disappointed," Susser says.

And you have to see it before you can do it, Ungerleider says. "If you are doing the luge, you have to understand the ice ahead of time," he says. "Weekend warriors can rehearse the tennis match or golf game or swimming competition in their mind. It works for everybody. It's about preparing and taking the time to do it."

By Denise Mann, MS, reviewed by Louise Chang, MD

SOURCES:Randy Gardner, former Olympic figure skater; world pair champion; U.S. national pair champion; coach, Los Angeles. Jenny Susser, PhD, sports psychologist, Women's Sports Medicine Center at the Hospital for Special Surgery, New York City. Dan G. Tripps, director, Master's in Sports Administration and Leadership program, Center for the Study of Sport, Seattle University, Washington. Steven Ungerleider, PhD, author, Mental Training for Peak Performance: Top Athletes Reveal the Mind Exercises They Use to Excel; psychologist, Eugene, Ore. Mark Hogue, PsyD, clinical psychologist, sports psychologist, Northshore Psychological Associates, Erie, Pa.; chairman, organizational outreach committee, Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology.

SEARCH

GO

[Click here for FOX News RSS Feeds](#)

Advertise on FOX News Channel, FOXNews.com and FOX News Radio

Jobs at FOX News Channel.

Internships at FOX News Channel (Summer Internship deadline is March 31, 2006).

Terms of use. Privacy Statement. For FOXNews.com comments write to foxnews@foxnews.com; For FOX News Channel comments write to comments@foxnews.com

© Associated Press. All rights reserved.

This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.

Copyright 2006 FOX News Network, LLC. All rights reserved.

All market data delayed 20 minutes.