

DEVELOPING THE MENTAL PLAN

Psychologically, several critical points appear to determine your performance outcome in a competitive situation. Two of these points occur in the precompetition phase, and three occur within the event itself.

PRECOMPETITION PHASE

A basic precompetition plan consists of an appropriate psychological warm-up combined with the physical warm-up, and an appropriate prestart focus. Through your psychological warm-up and immediate prestart focus plan, you are attempting to do three things:

1. You want to strengthen the feeling of being prepared in order to solidify your confidence in that preparation and in yourself.
2. You want to avoid the intrusion of self-defeating thoughts. They can raise the level of worry, lower confidence, or interfere with a good event, race, or game focus, thereby hindering your performance. You need to hold your attention away from worry and channel it into doing you the most good.
3. You want to help yourself enter into a more desirable prestart feeling-state, activation level, and focus to set the stage for a superior performance.

Psychological Warm-Up

First and probably most important is the general psychological warm-up that gets you into the right feeling or mental state going into the competition. An effective pre-planned psychological warm-up combines a series of self-suggestions describing what you feel good about and reminding you of what you are doing well in practice. This is sometimes referred to as “Going to the well”. The right pre-event feeling will increase the consistency of high-level performance.

Prestart Focus

A second crucial point is your focus of attention just before the start of the event. It should flow naturally out of a positive psychological warm-up. However, a specific prestart psych plan is also helpful. This will generally consist of a brief reminder of your event focus plan, an adjustment of your activation level, if necessary, and a focus of the first move(s) you will do, seconds before the start.

COMPETITION PHASE

The three critical psychological components of the competition itself can normally be broken down as follows:

Event Focus

How can you best focus your attention during the competition (on what, and at what points in time)?

Event Refocus

What can you do to get back on track if your focus drifts during the event? How, or what, will you focus, or refocus, in the case of a distraction, an error, or a setback?

Through your competition focus and cues for refocusing attention within the event, you are attempting to do several things.

1. Maintain a feeling of speed, power, control, or flow throughout the event, race, or game.
2. Stay on your event focus plan.
3. Be able to get back on track quickly if you get off your event focus plan (or preferred focus).
4. Be sure of extending yourself to the necessary limit.

Extending Limits

The third and final critical point within the event, which is not equally applicable to all sports, is your ability to mobilize all your energy and resources during the most demanding parts of the competition. Making a commitment and having a cue work to energize, to extend yourself, to push limits during critical points within the game or performance will be the final separator.