

Mental Skills Handbook  
Tufts Squash 2013-2014



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## What is mental skills training?

There are four areas that athletes in any sport must work on: technical, tactical, physical, and psychological. No one area should be emphasized over the other. A strength and conditioning coach tells his or her athletes to strengthen all muscle groups equally because injuries are more likely to occur if there is an imbalance. Similarly, focusing entirely on technical and tactical aspects of the game without training the body and mind will yield less than optimal performance results.

Mental skills are the tools that strengthen the psychological component of training. Popularly, this component has often been referred to as mental toughness. Elite athletes have defined mental toughness as "...the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to: 1) generally, cope better than your opponents with the many demands (competition, training, lifestyle) that sport places on a performer and 2) specifically, be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure" (Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2009).



This handbook covers the four core areas of mental skills training (goal setting, self-talk, imagery, and arousal regulation) and provides an example of each. Athletes and coaches should use this handbook as a resource to learn about various mental skills techniques and as a guide to create strategies that will work best for themselves. Learning to adapt existing mental skills techniques to most effectively serve one's own purposes takes practice. Athletes are encouraged to go through a trial-and-error process to discover what techniques help them reach their best performance.

## Goal Setting

Personally, I find the term “goal setting” to be aversive. Instead, I encourage you to think about the following question: *what do you want?* Every athlete wants something. Whether you want to be faster or stronger, a better leader, a more strategic player, or a better communicator, there always seems to be something to strive for. Having an organized plan will help you get what you want in the most efficient and effective manner. There are several basic guidelines to help you achieve those plans:

- 1) Be **specific**. While it is great to have goals such as “I want to be fitter” or “I want to win”, it is important to clarify exactly what you want to achieve. For instance, with fitness, you may decide you want to improve your cardiovascular endurance or core strength. Also, try to phrase your goals in positive (i.e. “I want my serves to land behind the service box”) rather than negative terms (i.e. “I don’t want to serve out”).
- 2) Find a way to **measure** your goals. This is important to track your progress. Find some standard of measurement to objectively evaluate whether you are getting closer to achieving your target. For instance, if your goal is to increase upper body strength, you may track your progress by recording the amount of weight you can bench press each week.
- 3) Set up a **time frame**. It is critical to have target dates by which you would like to accomplish the goal. The time frame may be short or long depending on what and how much you want to achieve. Also, you may have several smaller steps to help you get to the bigger-picture target.

4) Be **realistic**. Again, it is great to have goals such as “I want to win all my matches this season” or “I want to run a 4 minute mile”, but they may be difficult to attain. You want to set yourself for the best chance at success.

5) Stay **flexible**. You have now clearly defined what you want to achieve, how you will measure your progress, how long it will take you to accomplish it, and ensured that it is realistic. However, unexpected circumstances may arise, which may derail your plans. Be open to these changes, and make adjustments along the way when needed.

6) Most importantly, ask yourself: Is what I want **important to me**? At the end of the day, you are the one putting in the hard work and committing your time to achieve the aim. If you choose something that you truly value, you are more likely to stay motivated throughout the process. (Gould, 206-210)

Think about what you are excited to do this season, and write them down:

1.

2.

3.

Using the principles of goal setting and the example on the next page as a guideline, try to create a plan of action to fulfill those things you want to accomplish.

## Goal Setting Example

At the beginning of the season (November 1), a squash player notices that she cannot consistently place balls deep at the back of the court. She realizes that being able to consistently hit to the back of the court will strengthen her game and give her more opportunities to place her opponent on the defensive. She decides to work with a ball machine to improve her accuracy. She will dedicate 2 days per week outside of regular practice sessions for 40 minutes each (5 minutes for warm-up, 30 minutes of hitting, 5 minutes of cool-down and stretching). Before leaving for winter break (6 weeks), she wants to reach 80% accuracy hitting the ball into the area behind the service box within 5 floorboards of the sidewall (and she decides the ball can bounce off the back glass so long as it falls within the target zone). Here is her plan of action:

Week 1: Hit 10/50 balls anywhere behind the service box (blue zone)

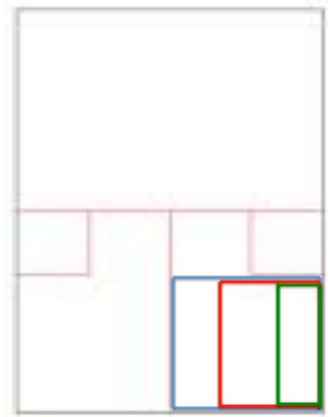
Week 2: Hit 20/50 balls anywhere behind the service box (blue zone)

Week 3: Hit 30/50 balls anywhere behind the service box (blue zone)

Week 4: Hit 40/50 balls anywhere behind the service box (blue zone)

Week 5: Hit 40/50 balls behind the service box w/in 10 floorboards (red zone)

Week 6: Hit 40/50 balls behind the service box w/in 5 floorboards (green zone)



## Self-Talk

Self-talk is exactly what its name conveys: talking to oneself or an internal dialogue. Self-talk can be used for many purposes including but not limited to: regulating one's emotions, staying focused, building confidence, and acquiring or practicing skills (Zinsser, Bunker, & Williams, 311). Self-talk follows the concept that what one thinks can affect what one feels which can affect how one behaves or performs (305). By this model, negative thoughts can cause negative emotions, which lead to poor performance.

The first step to controlling one's thoughts is *awareness* (316). Most of us go through a day thinking a million different things without ever being fully aware of them. Sometimes, we have a general sense of whether we are thinking negatively or positively, but it is critical to try to put words to those thoughts if we are to identify and change them. Once you have identified specific negative thoughts, there are several ways to control them. Here are some techniques:

- 1) **Thought stoppage**: literally stop the negative thought and focus instead on a thought directly related to the task at hand in the present moment
- 2) **Changing the negative thought to a positive thought**
- 3) **Countering**: using facts and reasons to refute the underlying beliefs and assumptions leading to the negative thought
- 4) **Reframing**: using an alternative perspective of looking at the situation so that it becomes positive (318-322)





## **Self-talk Example**

A player has just won the first two games of a match convincingly. He heads into game 3 expecting to win the match. He makes many unforced errors throughout the game and loses. Heading into game 4, he thinks to himself: "I am playing really badly. I can't hit any of the shots I want to hit. I'm going to lose. My opponent is better than me." Here are examples of how he might control his negative thoughts.

*Thought stoppage:* He is aware of his negative self-talk. He decides to use some sort of cue that will help him stop the negative thoughts that arise when he makes an unforced error and focus on what he needs to do in the moment. He might use verbal cues (short phrases) such as "Keep it simple", "Next point", "Forget about it", or "Let's go" or physical cues to get refocused such as wiping his hand on the glass, tapping his racket against the wall, or jumping up and down.

*Changing the negative thought into a positive thought:* He might think instead, "I can play better. I can do this. I can beat this guy."

*Countering:* He takes a moment to think rationally and realizes that the score is much closer than he thought, and he only lost game 3 by a few points. He knows he can execute the shots because he's done them in practice consistently, and he knows that he is ranked much higher than his opponent.

*Reframing:* He decides to look at the next game as a chance to show that he is fitter than his opponent. Working hard on endurance and agility is something he's especially proud of this season. Going into game 4, he will prove to himself and to others that his superior fitness is one of his greatest competitive advantages.

## Imagery

Imagery is also referred to as visualization or mental rehearsal. It involves creating or re-creating a vivid, specific experience in the mind involving all one's senses and emotions (Vealey & Greenleaf, 268). Much like self-talk, imagery can be used to control one's emotions, improve concentration, build confidence, acquire or practice skills and strategy, deal with injury, and prepare for competition (282).

Engaging in visualization can be likened to daydreaming with a purpose. There are two perspectives one can take when performing mental rehearsal. You might see yourself from your visual perspective practicing hitting drop shots, or you might see yourself moving around the court ghosting from an overhead perspective as if you are watching yourself in a movie (270).

Sometimes, athletes find it helpful to create imagery scripts, in which they outline exactly what they want to work on and how they want to experience it. It can also be helpful to refer to the script right before a match, when you first wake up in the morning, or right before you go to bed because it serves as a physical, clear reminder of what you want to experience/achieve. When creating an imagery script, it is important to write it using:

- a series of "I" statements
- present tense
- the emotions and sensations you would ideally like to experience
- vivid, specific, controllable images
- all your senses (visual, tactical, auditory, etc.)

(Baltzell, 2013)

## Imagery Example

A player strains her rotator cuff at the beginning of the season. Medical examinations confirm that the injury will not need surgical repair, but she needs to take an extended period of rest to allow her shoulder to heal. She is not allowed to hit and can only perform conditioning exercises that do not involve shoulder movement. She is really frustrated that she cannot play. She decides to create an imagery script to help her cope with the psychological aspect of rehabilitation. She reads the script everyday when she wakes up in the morning. She also reads it just before going to practice to relieve some of her anxiety and frustration.

*I can feel my shoulder healing. I can see the ligaments repairing and becoming stronger. In each physical therapy session, I feel stronger. I value my health and want to return once I am fully ready to compete. I see the progress I am making each week. I am recovering at my own pace. I am patient. I am grateful that I do not need surgery. I am thankful for having such supportive teammates, coaches, friends, and family, who are there for me every step of the way.*

*When I go to practice, I feel calm and relaxed. The sounds of rubber-soled shoes squeaking on the courts and rackets hitting squash balls remind me that I love this game. I am focused entirely on returning to play. I do what I can to stay fit and healthy. I follow PT protocol everyday. I am healing. I am excited to return.*

## **Arousal Regulation**

Arousal is simply psychophysiological activation. Arousal is closely linked with emotion, which is a psychophysiological reaction to some stimulus either real or imagined. An emotional response involves subjective appraisal or evaluation of the stimulus (Lazarus, 230). For instance, one player hears that he is playing several spots up in the ladder due to a number of injuries. He interprets this as a threatening situation and become intensely anxious for his match. Another player hears the same news but interprets this as an opportunity to prove he deserves to play at that position. He is excited and optimistic about his upcoming performance. These players face the same objective situation but have different emotional reactions to it, which likely lead to different performance results.

While there are many theories about how arousal states influence performance, it is important to determine what you want to feel before, during, and after competition to perform at *your* best. For example, if you want to feel energized and pumped up before a match, you might choose to listen to music, doing a pre-match warm-up, or socialize with teammates. On the other hand, if you want to reduce anxiety or stress, you might choose arousal reduction techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation, breathing exercises, visualization, or meditation. As with imagery scripts, it can be helpful to create relaxation scripts that incorporate some of these techniques and then record an audio version of it to listen to.

## **Arousal Regulation Example**

This is an example of a modified script from <http://www.innerhealthstudio.com/> that an athlete might convert into an audio recording. It combines progressive muscle relaxation and visualization/imagery to reduce anxiety and decrease arousal.

*Start by finding a comfortable position. As you settle in, direct your attention to your body. Notice how your body feels in this moment. Let your body begin to relax by releasing areas of tension. You feel the muscles in your face relax. Your neck and shoulders release all tension. Your arms and hands fall limp. Your abdominal muscles relax. Your legs are loose. Your feet relax. You feel no stress. You are at peace. Take a deep breath in. As you exhale, let your body relax even more. Where is your body feeling the most tense? Focus your attention on this area as you take another breath in, and feel this area relaxing as you breathe out. Continue to take slow deep breaths.*

*Imagine that you are outdoors at dusk. It is still light out, but the sun has set below the horizon. It is a pleasant temperature, comfortable.... and you are in a safe, peaceful place in the country, lying in the grass watching the night sky. The sky is becoming gradually darker. The highest part of the sky is a deep indigo color, becoming darker and darker as the moments pass. At the horizon, the sky is a shade of pink, mixed with gray in the fading light. The air around you is still and calm. In the distance, you can hear crickets and frogs as they begin to sing. The air is slightly cooler now, pleasantly cool against your forehead and cheeks. Looking at the horizon, distant trees are in silhouette. Your eyes are slowly adjusting to the decreasing light. As you gaze up at the sky above, it stretches from horizon to horizon like a vast dome. The sky is growing darker and is nearly black, fading to a lighter color near the horizon in the west.*

*You can see the first stars appear.... first one star... and then another.... and another.... See them twinkle.... shining like tiny diamonds. As you look at the darkening sky, you can see more and more stars. Relax and enjoy the dusk, watching night begin.*

*The sky is even darker now. There is only a slight hint of light at the horizon where the sun has set. The sky is so clear. You see no clouds anywhere to obscure the starry sky. More stars have appeared, until now the sky looks like it has been sprinkled by a saltshaker full of gleaming crystals of salt that are stars. Some stars are bright, luminous. Others are tiny specs that you can barely see. Simply enjoy relaxing under the starry sky, enjoying this quiet retreat.*

*Now the sky is jet black. Out here, away from city lights, the stars are amazingly bright. Have you ever seen so many stars? The sky is filled with so many stars you would not even be able to count them. See the constellations formed by stars like hundreds of connect the dots pictures spread out before you. The starry sky is so huge, so vast, a beautiful glimmering blanket of stars stretching up in a complete circle around you from every horizon. Admire the starry sky feeling calm, relaxed, at peace....*

*When you are ready to leave this place, you can begin to reawaken your body and mind. Feel your muscles reawakening as you take note of your surroundings. Slowly return to the present.... Move your muscles by wiggling your fingers.... now open and close your hands a few times. Wiggle your toes.... move your ankles.... Move your arms and legs.... Stretch if you want to, feeling your body becoming fully awake. Take a moment to sit quietly as you reawaken completely. Notice that you still feel calm and relaxed, though you are awake and alert. When your mind and body are fully awake, you can resume your usual activities, feeling refreshed.*

## **Case Study: When a referee makes a call you disagree with**

Now that we have reviewed all the major mental skills and the importance of mental skills training, I will highlight a specific scenario many squash players encounter in a match, during which you might consider applying the tools you have just learned. Please watch the following clip of the 2001 PSA Super Series Semi-Finals match between Jonathon Power and David Palmer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3AkqvWGF2u0>. This is a very intense match between two of the most competitive squash players in the world, but Power's dramatic, emotional responses are the most interesting aspect of this match.

At the start of the clip, Power has already won the first two games (15-9 and 15-6). In game 3, the score is 2-2 when the referee calls Power's ball not up, explaining the ball had bounced twice when Power went to dive for the drop shot. Power vehemently argues the call, and there is a lengthy verbal exchange. Palmer annoyed says, "Stop talking to him. Make a decision, that's it." Later in that game, Power is up 15-14 when he tins another diving drop shot. In frustration, he slams his racket against the floor and shatters the frame. Power receives a conduct warning for his behavior. At 16-16 game ball, Power tins a forehand drive, losing game 3.

In game 4, Palmer is up 6-3, and Power hits a drop shot and falls down just right of the T. Palmer trips over Power trying to get from the T to play the ball. The referee calls a stroke to Palmer. Power again argues with the referee. When she refuses to change the call, Power storms off court (while off court, he grabs the racket he broke in game 3 and smashes it over his knee). The referee gives Power a conduct stroke, putting Palmer up 8-3 within a span of 10 seconds. Palmer wins that game 15-6.

In game 5, the score is tied 4-4 when Power asks for what he believes is an obvious let. Palmer continues play and hits a winning shot. When Power appeals for the let again, the referee sides with Palmer and reprimands Power to make more effort to play the shot. Power screams in frustration at the referee, "Oh my god, you are ruining this!" Later, Palmer leads 11-10 when Power is finally awarded a stroke, drawing even with Palmer. Power dramatically starts blowing kisses to the heavens, a sarcastic jibe at the referee who he perceives to have been working against him throughout the match. Palmer is then up 13-12 when Power asks for a let thinking he would receive a stroke. The referee calls play let not a stroke, and Power shrieks in disbelief. At 14-14 match ball, Palmer hits the winning shot into the nick, coming back from behind to win.



*If you were Power's sport psychologist, what mental skills techniques might you recommend to help him?*



There are a few major takeaways from this match:

1) When a referee makes a call you disagree with, **accept it and move on.**

- Power failed to accept the referee's calls and dwelled on them until the end of the match. His comment in game 5 "you are ruining this" expressed how he believed the referee was at fault for his poor performance.

- There are things within your control, and things you cannot control. You cannot control a referee's decision. Referees are only human and can make mistakes. You *can* however control your emotional response to that decision.

2) Pay attention to your **body language.**

- Power completely lost control over his thoughts and emotions, and his behavior and body language reflected it. Slamming his racket into ground, screaming, and storming off court all demonstrated his frustration and anger. Palmer then used this information to his advantage.

- Notice Palmer's body language throughout the match. He remains much more composed and calm compared to Power.

3) **Emotions** are powerful and can **affect performance.**

- Power's emotions caused him to focus on performance-irrelevant cues and distracted him from the playing his game. At his worst, his anger cost him a stroke for misconduct. Arguably, one of the reasons Power lost this match, despite having a comfortable 2-0 lead, was because of his inability to control his emotions.

- Even when you do not feel like you are in control or confident or good, you can choose to focus on what you need to do to perform well.

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