

WHEELHOUSE: THINK WITH YOUR MUSCLES

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Many athletes with great physical capabilities decide to leave competitive sports because they can't perform under pressure. They might perform to perfection in practice but choke when it comes to an actual competition. Why does this happen? What can we do to help an athlete who is physically talented and shows the utmost potential to be successful, but doesn't possess the ability to execute when the time has arrived?

There are ways to learn how to perform consistently at 100%. You have to actively strengthen and train your brain. You have to create intentional habits in your mental muscles: confidence, motivation, focus and intensity.

Confidence is the most important mental factor when it comes to performance. You may have all of the necessary physical skills and tactical skills in your arsenal, but if you don't believe you have that capability of performing well, then you simply won't. Confidence is developed from several sources: being over-prepared; sharpening your mental toolbox so you can face problems when they arise and responding positively to the inevitable adversity; and keeping positive when things aren't going your way. Your goal is to develop resilience that will give you the ability to stay positive when you're not performing well and allow yourself to take the necessary risks in that moment.

Motivation is your determination and what drives you to achieve your sporting goals. It is the foundation of everything you do in your sport. Motivation is important because it impacts physical fitness, technical training, mental preparation and your lifestyle. There are some strategies you can engage to help your short-term motivation: setting and reminding yourself of your goals for the coming season; having a training partner; listening to motivating music; and making sure your training is fun. For the long-term motivation that is a requirement for continued success, you must find the motivation inside of you. You need that driving reason that keeps you going when you're tired, in pain, bored or plateauing.

Otherwise, you will not be able to succeed.

When it comes time to take any sort of action in sport, focus becomes another essential piece of how well you perform in the moment. Our best focus levels stem from making observations on things that will help you perform your best—specific techniques, tactics effort—and avoiding distractions that interfere with your performance—results, other athletes and external factors. It is trial and error, but the more you try, the more likely you are to find something that sticks with you. Your ability to stay focused from start to finish will determine how well you perform and whether you will be able to maintain it.

Whether you are about to begin a practice session or come to the first round of a tournament, intensity is another large contributor to athletic success. Intensity is the level of physiological responses you feel in your body. Some of these responses include heart rate, respiration, blood flow and adrenaline levels. Intensity lies on a continuum that ranges from sleep (very relaxed) to terror (very anxious). Somewhere in between those two extremes is the level of intensity at which you are personally most capable of performing your best—that is your wheelhouse. The biggest challenge with intensity and teaching how to get there is that there is not one ideal level for all athletes: everyone has their specific performance zone or their own comfort zone.

Depending on your physical and psychological make-up, you may perform your well very relaxed, moderately intense or fired up. Your goal is to identify your level and actively reach your ideal intensity before every practice and competition.

Like any muscle in your body, these four mental muscles won't just develop on their own. Rather, you have to actively train them in a structured and consistent mental training program and being intentional with your practice and approach. By strengthening these mental muscles, you will have a chance to perform at your best and achieve your athletic goals. **SM**

