

Chapter 6 – It's all about having a positive mental attitude – Isn't It?

In 1996 in the UK, there was a TV commercial for a brand of washing powder. It featured a young boy preparing for his school sports day. He is advised by his Father that "To perform like Linford (Linford Christie – 1992 Olympic 100m champion), you have to think like Linford – PMA, positive mental attitude". On the start line, the boy hears the voice of his Father in his head – "PMA". Of course, the boy is victorious in the sack race and the phrase 'Positive Mental Attitude' entered the national discourse.

The idea 'Positive Mental Attitude' goes back much further than 1996. It was first alluded to by author Napoleon Hill in his book "Think and Grow Rich" published in 1937, he later used the phrase in the title of another book, co-written with W. Clement Stone – called "Success Through Positive Mental Attitude". In the text, a collection of virtues or 'plus' characteristics were described; faith, integrity, hope, optimism, courage, initiative, generosity, tolerance, tact, kindness and good common sense. The main idea behind the book is that an optimistic and hopeful disposition is the necessary starting point for positive changes and leads to higher levels of achievement.

Despite the phrase having common currency, many lay people had no real sense of how to 'catch' PMA, or indeed whether it really was a good thing to have. It has an intuitive appeal, but PMA became a rather hollow cliché rather than something that people could work to develop in the belief that could have a positive impact on sport performance or life in general.

#BELIEVE and the importance of failure.

PMA may win you the school sack race, but it probably not win you an Olympic Gold medal – you need some good fortune to have inherited the right blend of physical characteristics, then you need to train to develop the physical, technical and tactical skills necessary to consistently perform at that level. And, perhaps counterintuitively, you need to understand the importance of failure.

Failure is a difficult concept for many people to grasp. There is a widely held assumption that winning *all the time* is essential and that to believe anything different is, in itself, a sign of mental weakness. This is at the root of much faulty and unhelpful thinking.

The reality is that playing sport means that you 'fail' a lot of the time. This is why failure is such a misleading and misunderstood term. The word covers everything from a tiny insignificant disappointment to major life changing setbacks; but in essence it is simply a description of not achieving what you set out to achieve. It seems like a very binary idea – you succeed or you fail. In fact, failure is much more complex and important. The seeds of success are often sown in 'failure' as the seeds of failure are sown in success. And it all boils down to BELIEF, belief that we have the right people, belief that preparation is will develop the performance qualities needed to overcome the most difficult opponents, belief in the systems around the development of talent; the list is endless: But with belief comes commitment. In that general act of belief is the key idea of self-belief; belief before the game that you can out-perform others, belief that you can achieve your goals, belief that in this

game the magic will return. In the game; belief that you can bounce back after a setback, belief that you can refocus after a distraction or error.

Without belief, many would see only the prospect of not achieving our desired outcomes; ie failure, without belief some would see no reason to continue and would walk away. Learning to live with failure, in all its forms is important, some would say a defining attribute for the sports failure. Belief means coming back stronger after each fall.

The problem for the performer, coach or parent is that self-belief takes on so many forms and can often feel like an act rather than an authentic and robust characteristic.

What is self-belief?, and which is better, the extravagant demonstrations of self-belief from someone like Mohammed Ali – ‘I’m the greatest’ or the quiet, authoritative, but robust self- belief shown by Katherine Grainger or Jessica Ennis - Hill?

Whether expressed loudly or quietly, self-belief is a statement of your expectation that you can do the jobs that need to be done in order to get the outcome you want. Self-belief is less about confidence and more about competence – and this is where things get interesting and often a bit challenging!

In explaining confidence and self-belief sport psychologists draw heavily on a line of theory developed by Albert Bandura to explain self-belief. Rather than calling it self-belief, Bandura described this set of expectations as ‘self-efficacy’ and importantly expressed the very clear distinction between efficacy expectations and outcome expectations. Efficacy expectations are predictions about our ability to execute very specific skills. These may or may not lead to the desired outcome. This is critical in sport performance, where we may execute skills at our technical and physical limit, but another competitor perform the skills 1% better – on that day they win.

Confidence is over-rated; it can and often is faked. Talk in sport is very cheap. We see this type of theatre played out in sport. From the ‘trash talk’ before a big boxing event to the glib platitudes of football managers. Competence is the actual doing, the consistent execution of skills, time after time. People are often fooled by a thin veneer of confidence. What we should look for is competence – consistent execution of the skills necessary to achieve outcomes. But not; not necessarily the outcomes themselves.

Confidence that you will win every time you perform is misplaced and potentially dangerous, but confidence that you can execute the skills that make it more likely that you will win is more useful and more likely to stand the real-life tests you will face in performance.

Glenn McGrath, one of Australia’s finest bowlers, was quoted as saying that he expected to win a five match Ashes series 5-0. His logic was simple, he expects to win every game he plays in. If he wins every game, his team wins every series 5-0. Is this arrogance? I think not, this is a deep seated belief that he and his team mates have the skills necessary to overcome opponents. It is based in fact. He played in arguably the strongest Australian team of all time. The facts spoke. He also recognised that he personally was not the ‘finished article’ he worked hard to continue to develop as a player. To become more competent and more threatening.

The challenge for the sport psychology practitioner is to ensure that performers reconnect with their competence, this is how deep, robust self-belief is built. Many performers I have worked present with a glass mostly empty, perception gap – in the course a performance they may do 100 things – 10 are outstanding, 80 are good enough and 10 are disappointing – the player tends to dwell on the 10 ‘failures’? Building deep, robust self-belief needs to address both extremes – keep working to polish the things you are good at, but more critically work even harder to eliminate those areas which are less strong. When you walk into a competitive arena with no discernible areas of weakness you are a formidable opponent – you have earned the right to be confident.

Developing a Positive Psychology in Sport.

At around the same time as the TV commercial described above, two developments in academic psychology were emerging to put the idea of PMA into a more formal and theoretical context. One was the fundamental redrawing of the parameters of psychology itself; resulting in the development of Positive Psychology, the other was a revisiting and development of an old idea in sport psychology; mental toughness. Both have links to the idea of PMA, both have been applied to sport performance and both have prompted or framed questions from my clients.

Ever since the Freudian era at the turn of the 20th Century, psychology has been characterised as a science which aims to understand and reduce human distress. Despite modern psychology moving a long way from this, there is a common misconception that the focus, particularly of applied psychology, is to understand and treat psychological illnesses. Positive psychology adopted the opposing position, its aim is to understand the things that make life worth living and use this knowledge to create conditions of psychological growth and optimal human performance.

The Positive Psychology movement is extremely new, so new that anyone who studied academic psychology before around the year 2000 will probably have missed it. It made a dramatic entry onto the stage. In 1998, Martin Seligman, a very prominent and respected figure in mainstream academic psychology was nominated as the president of the American Psychological Association, one of the largest and prestigious professional bodies in the world. In his Presidential address, Seligman made the provocative statement that psychology should be as interested in what makes people happy as with what makes people depressed. This put positive psychology on the map.

Martin Seligman and a familiar name; Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (we met him earlier in a question about peak performance) were the catalysts for research and theory development around four main areas;

- Positive experiences, such as the flow state described earlier in the text.
- Positive psychological traits, such as hope, optimism and confidence,
- Positive relationships and
- Positive institutions, such as healthy functioning families or workplaces.

Seligman remains a key figure in the development of positive psychology as a movement and his theoretical framework identifies 5 key characteristics of psychological well-being. These are summarised in the acronym PERMA.

- Positive Emotions

- Engagement
- Relationships
- Meaning
- Accomplishments.

It is easy to see why sport fits easily into a positive psychology framework and provides a context for people to experience some or all of these.

The reason we are looking at positive psychology in relation to sport performance is two-fold; firstly sport is something that many people do for enjoyment and psychological growth, it gives many people a means of improving their quality of life, despite sometimes, after a defeat or while experiencing an injury, it feels like the opposite! Secondly, sport is an excellent context for studying optimal human performance, where mental strength can lead to superhuman achievement and overcoming seemingly impossible challenges to achieve goals.

Positive psychology is the theoretical backdrop to much that we do in sport (and exercise) psychology

Mental Toughness

The term mental toughness was first coined by sport psychologist Dr Jim Loehr in the title of his book first published in 1986: “Mental Toughness Training for Sports”. Loehr believed that being mentally tough was as important in consistent high level performance as being physically tough. In the book he proposed mental toughness as having four components; self-discipline, self-control, self-confidence and self-realization. He also outlined a training system which included relaxation exercises, meditation and emotional control exercises designed to impact positively on performance and enable the performer to consistently perform towards the upper range of their talent and skill, regardless of competitive circumstances. Wimbledon Singles Tennis Champion Arthur Ashe endorsed Loehr's principles in the book's foreword.

In the period following the publication of Loehr's book, the concept of mental toughness became a victim of its own success. Many coaches picked up the idea of mental toughness and ‘span’ it to emphasise their own views about what constituted mental toughness. It became all things to all people. Indeed I recall doing a ‘mental skills’ workshop for a group of coaches from around 10 different sports – each one had their own personal definition of mental toughness and, importantly whilst some had developed methods they believed could be used to develop mental toughness others firmly believed that mental toughness was genetically determined and could not be altered by training.

Because of the lack of general agreement about what mental toughness was, and the extent to which it could be trained, it was not given much attention by the academic research community. Until 2002, when a group of researchers led by Graham Jones at Loughborough University in the UK, published a paper redefining mental toughness. This paper was a key watershed event, reigniting interest and debate about mental toughness.

In their research Jones and his co-workers interviewed a sample of international level performers and then analysed the themes emerging from their definitions of mental toughness. Their research yielded a new definition for mental toughness;

“Having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to: generally, cope better than your opponents with the many demands

(competition, training, lifestyle) that sport places on a performer; specifically, be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure."

Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002, p. 209

More importantly the work identified 12 elements underpinning the definition. These are ranked in order of importance to the sample they collected their data from;

1. Having an unshakable self-belief in your ability to achieve your competition goals.
2. Bouncing back from performance set-backs as a result of increased determination.
3. Having an unshakable self-belief that you possess unique qualities and abilities that make you better than your opponents.
4. Having an insatiable desire and internalized motives to succeed.
- 4= Remaining fully-focused on the task at hand in the face of competition-specific distractions.
6. Regaining psychological control following unexpected, uncontrollable events. (competition-specific)
7. Pushing back the boundaries of physical and emotional pain, while still maintaining technique and effort under distress (in training and competition)
8. Accepting that competition anxiety is inevitable and knowing that you can cope with it.
9. Thriving on the pressure of competition.
- 9=Not being adversely affected by others' good and bad performances.
- 11 Remaining fully-focused in the face of personal life distractions.
12. Switching a sport focus on and off as required.

In my applied work I often give clients this list to look at as a prompt to explore their views on mental toughness. In my experience, performers are much better than psychologists for seeing the 'wood for the trees' – some performers, immediately see – this tells me confidence and self-belief is the key attribute, and I need to work with the psychologist to develop that. Others, see attention and focus as the key issue. Whilst others still see motivation and commitment. Of course, they are all correct. As an applied psychologist, first and foremost, I am less concerned with the academic detail of defining the construct and more with how it is interpreted by the client and then what can be done to develop aspects through our collaboration.

Jones' work caused significant ripples around the world of sport psychology, on the one hand it is very helpful to have a clear definition that we could all agree on, on the other hand, the 12 themes Jones and his co-workers identified are so broad and generic, many psychologists felt that we were back to the 'collection of virtues' problem that we saw with Positive Mental Attitude.

Other problems were also highlighted; for example, many of the characteristics identified could be interpreted differently according to context. For example is it mentally 'tougher' for a performer carrying an injury to push through pain to complete a game or event, risking a more serious injury; or withdraw from event in the knowledge that they will recover quicker and be back performing sooner?

Critics of this Jones' teams' conceptualisation of mental toughness were concerned that although it provided a useful 'shorthand' to communicate with coaches and

performers, it was really composed of discrete elements. Another team of researchers, led by Dr Peter Clough at the University of Hull, conceptualised mental toughness as being composed of commitment, control, challenge and concentration, an approach that quickly became known as the “4C’s” model. There were two main plus points of the 4C’s approach; firstly that the model had developed from a strong theoretical background which could be traced back to work on the idea of psychological hardiness which had been done in the 1970’s and 80’s by a health psychologist Suzanne Kobasa. Her work had examined why some people were able to manage occupational stress better than others. It also indicated that people who were best able to manage stress had developed a psychological hardiness which combined aspects of personality with robust coping skills which enabled them to thrive. The other plus point of the 4C’s model was that Clough’s team had developed and tested an assessment tool – the MT48, a questionnaire, with unsurprisingly 48 questions which assessed the four component attributes. This was very widely used in a range of sporting and business settings.

Another team of researchers led by Daniel Gucciardi at the University of Queensland in Australia, proposed an alternative approach to mental toughness. This model views mental toughness as a process, where attitudes, emotions, and thoughts influence the way a person approaches or avoids challenges.

Mental toughness has had a huge impact on sport psychology since interest was rekindled in 2002. There are many technical and academic debates and disagreements about its nature and its application. But the fact remains, mental toughness is a quality that sport performers value and are keen to develop. The applied sport psychologist is tasked with first clearly understanding what it means to that individual and then putting intervention in place which develop those qualities.

Self-regulation & Resilience: Are these sub-sets of mental toughness or is mental toughness a subset of them?

Self-regulation theory was first proposed by Roy Baumeister in the 1980s (Baumeister and Vohs, 2004). It was initially developed as a model explaining how people consciously regulate their thoughts, emotions and behaviours to achieve valued goals. Baumeister described this in terms of a four stage process; the first being to establish desired goals, in terms of processes, performances and outcomes. The next step is to identify and reinforce a sense of purpose, giving motivation to meet the goals set. The third stage involves the monitoring of situations, with a particular focus on the conditions where effort to achieve goals is diminished or withdrawn – i.e when and why do you stop trying to achieve the goal? And what thoughts and emotions precede this withdrawal of effort? The final stage relates to willpower, or the internal strength to control urges which interfere with the striving towards and achievement of the set goals. Some academic researchers argue that mental toughness is best explained within the lens of more general self-regulation theory. I think this is useful approach – Baumeister’s work covers a range of applications where many of the qualities identified in the sport psychology literature are common.

The literature on resilience began to emerge in the mid 2000’s with research indicating that resilience is a stronger predictor of academic achievement than IQ. From this literature an application in sport began to develop – with resilience being defined as the ability to respond positively to setbacks, failures and obstacles. This

looks a lot like several of the theme items from Jones' et al's model of mental toughness first described in their 2002 study.

Is resilience the same as mental toughness? It would appear to have elements in common, it would also appear to share elements of Seligman's PERMA framework. In psychology ideas from different sources often converge.

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Q6.1 Is mental toughness something you are born with or is it something that can be taught? If it can be developed, how should we best enhance it?

This is a question that goes to the heart of our understanding of talent identification and development. There is a growing body of evidence to say that genetic factors play a very important part in sport performance. Particularly in sports where there is a relatively smaller skill component – such as running and cycling. In these sports, having the right blend of metabolic genes expressed can endow a very significant advantage. However, at the top level of sport, where most competitors share that genetic advantage, other factors will determine success. If mental toughness is genetic and cannot be developed then sport psychologists are effectively redundant – we can have marginal influence in performers who have already had success. My view is that in common with almost every personality characteristic ever studied, behaviours associated with mental toughness are determined by combination of a genetic (nature) and environmental (nurture) factors. Without studies on identical twins, where some are raised together and share the developmental environment and others are raised apart, it is extremely difficult to put a figure on exactly how much is nature and how much is nurture. My view is from a practical perspective, that doesn't matter. If any mental toughness gains can be achieved by creating a rich developmental environment, then we should do it. This sets up your second question – how do we create an environment which develops mental toughness?

The default that many coaches use is that we have to 'break performers down' in order to make them mentally tough. This is an old fashioned idea from military training, that you will only get tough competitors who are willing to push themselves to the limits of physical endurance by putting them through unrelenting hardship. I'm not saying there is no place for that, sport tests people physically and the ability to cope with that should be coached and practiced. This should not be the only tool used. Robust self-belief can come from surviving an arduous task, but many performers will have self-belief destroyed by a coach continually telling them how weak and inadequate they are. Looking at the list of attributes identified in the opening text gives some ideas about how to ensure that mental toughness develops alongside physical and technical toughness.

Here are some ideas.

1. Continual development of skills. Players should be continually challenged to develop skills which make them better than the best opponents they will face, not the average opponent.
2. Graded exposure to the 'next level' of performance. Competition should be as matched as possible – not continually playing against poor or strong opponents.
3. Players should be encouraged to reflect on what they need to do to get better, physically, technically, tactically and mentally.
4. A supportive dialogue with coaches on how to cope physically and mentally with the training and competitive environment.
5. A supportive atmosphere among players to develop mutual support.

This looks like a very ambitious agenda – asking players who are competing for starting positions on the same team to support each other. But it can and does help. Equally, old school coaching demands that players toughen up and ‘grow some’. I’d have no issues with these beliefs if it has always yielded results. But it hasn’t, and it is a complete lack of the softer communication skills of coaches that have meant that many players, with physical and technical ability have failed to fulfil their potential.

Theoretical Commentary

This question is an example of the epigenetic complexity of psychology. The human genome project was formally launched in 1990 with the aim to identify and code every base-base pair in every gene in human DNA. The project was formally concluded in 2003, with much greater understanding of the molecular basis of human physiology, but also with more questions than answers.

No-one anticipated quite the extent to which the environment influenced whether genes were expressed, this is at the heart of a new science of epigenetics. Over the next decades epigenetics will revolutionise sport, particularly the science of training, where it is absolutely clear that for physical training to yield optimal results it must be tailored to the individual. It is highly likely that mental training will require the same treatment.

To date, the research literature gives some general principles as to how best to create an enriching mental toughness environment. A study by Connaughton, Hanton and Jones (2010) identified the development of skills, inherent competitiveness, exposure to high level competition, along with educational and psychological support. They also suggested that a strong framework for reflecting on performance and using both positive and negative experience as the stimulus for developing mental toughness.

However, my personal view is that as understanding of epigenetics develops, the ability of coaches, teachers and parents to assess individual needs of individuals will become more important. Coaching, teaching and parenting has never been easy, but I suspect it is about to become even more challenging. One size fits all coaching will not do.

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Q6.2 Our coach shouts at us all the time, he says he is toughening us up, but really he is just p*issing us off. Is there any science behind what he's doing?

This approach to coaching is unfortunately common. It is a throwback to old fashioned models of coaching, adapted from military training and very dated physical education practice. In some performers it may be appropriate, but in most cases it is a lazy, inefficient and ineffective way of proceeding.

It's lazy because it indicates that the coach hasn't taken sometime to engage with players as individuals and find out what helps them develop and what doesn't.

It's inefficient because the science actually indicates that this type of approach to coaching is one of the major causes of people, particularly youngsters dropping out of sport. This is talent lost to the sport.

It's ineffective because it's not even a very good way of making people mentally tougher. Mental toughness is better developed by building competence, self-belief and coping skills, related to actual play.

Not surprisingly the players are getting fed up and switching off. My suggestion is that you speak to the coach and make some suggestions about how he can make positive changes to what he is doing. In the first instance it can be a positive, but assertive exchange of views. But he needs to understand the players' frustrations and what he is risking in continuing in this way.

Theoretical Commentary

I am answering this question just after the controversy around Shane Sutton's departure from British Cycling. Sutton was the performance director of British Cycling who resigned after a very public breakdown in his relationship with a specific rider and claims from others that the coaching environment was built on a climate of fear and bullying.

This is an extremely difficult and sensitive question. What is perceived as bullying by one person may be perceived in a different way by another. The question goes to the heart of the coach – athlete relationship. Coaching is an important and privileged role. The coach - athlete relationship is a developmental process designed to create optimal conditions for the performer to fulfil their physical, technical and tactical potential. With it comes a great deal of responsibility and a recognition of the power-imbalance that performers may perceive. Coaches can hold a great deal influence over the career of their athletes and this can lead to a feeling of powerlessness. For some performers, there is a need for 'tough love' – setting very difficult goals and then challenging the performer to believe they can achieve them. For others, such an approach completely undermines their intrinsic motivation and creates fear and undermines self-belief. But where is the line? The problem is that the line differs for each performer. This is why the first step in any coaching relationship is assessment – the coach must understand what each performer needs and equally, what will probably switch them off.

In some of the discussion that followed the departure of Shane Sutton from British Cycling, a distinction was drawn between coaching practise in elite sport and sub-elite levels. Some commentators believed that bullying and a climate of 'fear' was acceptable in elite sport. I don't subscribe to this this view. Most performers are

intrinsically motivated, constantly striving for gains in performance and don't need additional 'pushing'. They are also frequently only too conscious that their place on the team is dependent on performance. If they don't deliver, someone else will. Constantly being reminded of this can lead to overtraining, under-recovery and other physical and psychological issues.

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Q6.3 What is the best way of assessing a performers' mental toughness?

I have noted in previous questions about assessment that I'm not keen on 'pencil and paper' tests of psychological constructs. They tend to be of more use in research than in applied practice or coaching.

If you are determined to measure Mental Toughness there are several questionnaires available to use without cost – The MTQ or PPI can be accessed online. The MT48 developed by Clough et al (see above) is not freely available, but can be accessed at cost from <http://www.aqr.co.uk/>.

My preference is for the parent, teacher or coach to invest a little time to a) clarify with each player what mental toughness means in their individual context and then to b) observe actual behaviour over a period of time and c) set goals to develop that specific aspect. For example, a player may find it difficult to 'reboot' in performance after an error. This is a key skill and one that needs to be worked on. Strategies can be agreed in conversation between the performer, coach and perhaps psychologist. These are then tested in actual performance.

This, for me, is a much more, valid assessment of mental toughness than a general question on a pencil and paper test.

Theoretical Commentary

Some governing bodies require psychologists to collect evidence that their work has been effective. Psychometric testing is a tempting but problematic way to do this. I have been asked to deliver interventions for teams, designed to improve the mental toughness of members. It seems obvious that the best way to demonstrate the effectiveness of my work is to give mental toughness questionnaires to players before the work begins and then retest at the end. If there has been an improvement in scores then the work has been effective.

This is flawed and highlights another problem of adopting a purely nomothetic approach. By nomothetic I mean I am assessing people in terms of shared characteristics; i.e responses to the questions and constructs within a questionnaire. This emphasises how people are similar. In contrast assessment of ideographic characteristics identifies how people are unique and different. This is much less readily captured in a questionnaire. It is highly likely that the characteristics which make an individual mental tough and able to outperform others are unique.

Using questionnaires to assess the effectiveness of interventions is problematic for a range of statistical reasons as well. For example, do you report a mean change? Or a median? or a percentage? How do you cope with anomalies in the data – where 50% of the team report a positive change but 50% report a negative one, but the magnitude of the positive change is larger?

Unless you have been trained specifically in the administration and interpretation of a questionnaire, I would strongly advise you not to use it. (See Marchant 2010)

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Q6.4 What is self-belief and where does it come from? What I really mean is how can become more confident?

I note that you have used self-belief as a synonym for confidence. I am happy to use it in that way.

Confidence is frequently cited as the single most important psychological factor in sport performance. You know when you have it and you play differently. It leads to all kinds of positive thoughts, emotions and behaviours. But, performers often find it really difficult to conceptualise self-belief, to understand what it is and why it appears to be so fragile.

Confidence makes you feel you can do anything, you feel you can execute all the necessary skills for your performance really well. When you are feeling confident you have an ease to your movements and you believe you cope with anything that is thrown at you. But you also know that confidence levels can change really quickly. You may leave home for a competition feeling very confident but by the time you have arrived your levels have dropped and it drops even further when you catch sight of the opposition.

Everyone has a slightly different personal definition for confidence but when all the differences are boiled away we are left with a definition which is based around the strength of the belief that you can execute a certain skill or set of skills. This is where many people go wrong. Confidence is NOT a belief that you are going to win every game. This type of thought is more to do with optimism than confidence. Optimism in the outcome is fine but ultimately you are not in control of the outcome. You can do everything in your power to win but ultimately it is determined by events outside your control.

From this definition you can see that confidence and competence sit very closely together. Your confidence will go up as you become more competent. In particular, confidence goes up as you see that your competence in the skills you believe to be relative weaknesses improves. Entering competitions with no weaknesses is a goal to strive for.

How can you achieve this?

The first step is to profile your performance to identify areas of your skill set which give you the greatest potential for gains. You can do this using a performance profiling type of exercise. This is where you benchmark your performance against the characteristic of either an individual or composite of a consistent high level performer. Identify the performance areas which are perceived to be the areas which will yield the greatest performance improvements. These could be technical, physical, tactical or mental. If you have a coach, or a fellow player you trust and feel safe sharing this profile with, do so, it has the potential to add to the value of the process.

The next step is to identify some process type of goals – ie things that you can do on a daily or session basis designed to develop that area of skill. You may be able to

develop these process goals into a performance goal or 'milestone' which can give you an indication of the effectiveness of the skill development practice. The final step in this process is the most important. You should regularly review practices and performances to reflect on the development of the practiced skills. The most effective way to do this is to have a review section in your training diary. Identify the goals you have set for each training session or event. Then write down the things that have gone well or better than expected – you can break these down into sub sections – physical, technical, tactical and mental. Then note down the things which didn't go as well as you'd hoped. The deal here is that you can only have as many in this column as the previous one! I am not having you 'wallow' in all the things you can't do! The final column is the most important – if you are really committed to self-development - this is writing clearly what you need to do in the next block of training or next performance to ensure the things that didn't go as well as you'd hoped are either improved or eliminated. Again, working with a coach or colleague can really cement this part of the process.

I've an example of this type review grid below;

	What was your goal for this session?	What went better than expected?	What didn't go as well as expected?	What are my 'work-ons' / what will I do differently?
Physical	To keep intensity high for full session.	Paced myself really well. Still engaged in final 10 minutes.	Felt I wasn't making big runs early on. Could be missing opportunities to get forward.	Speak to coach about this – need to work on 'engine'
Technical	Sharper first touch. Accurate passing off left foot.	Good scanning – first touch helps. Accuracy improving on left.	Still tending to look up before getting ball under control. Long balls with left were poor.	Keep working on this! Work on!
Tactical	Staying closer when marking. Finding space when supporting ball carriers.	Good – when I remember – need to keep reminding myself. Really pleased – kept making runs.	The guy I was marking got free a couple of times as corners. Got free a couple of times late on as game opened up	Need to stay close and goal side – remind myself.
Mental	Keeping head up after an error. Staying in the game.	Good early on.	Got angry after a bad challenge.	Staying calm – anger is wasted energy.

Some performers don't like doing this, believing it to be too time consuming. I think this can be done in about 10 / 15 minutes and its contribution to confidence can be profound.

You can also see that this process also acts as a prompt for the development of other mental skills. Firstly, it can help you set goals for yourself. For example, an

area of development is cardiovascular fitness – by doing some additional, multiple sprint training, the ability to stay engaged and make ‘box to box’ runs in the later stages can be turned from an area of perceived weakness to an area of strength. Another area of skill development is the use of self-talk – here to act an instruction, when defending the set piece. The self-talk acts as an instructional cue, this needs to be practiced for it to become a habit.

Theoretical Commentary.

Given its prominence in the sport psychology literature, I have always felt that sport confidence has been an under-researched area. Our current understanding of sport confidence is been largely informed by the work of Bandura (1977, (1998) and the development of this by Vealey and her co-workers (Vealey & Chase, 2008, and Vealey, Hayashi, Garner-Holman and Giacobbi, 1998). These theoretical approaches give a good foundation about the sources of confidence but are less helpful in informing practitioners about how to design interventions aimed at building confidence.

Vealey and Vernau (2010) present a useful applied model designed to identify the key features of effective interventions. This model identifies four key areas;

1. The role of physical (*and tactical, technical, and mental – I’ve added these!*) training and preparation – PERSPIRATION.
2. Self-regulation (self-talk, imagery, goal setting / monitoring and review) – REGULATION
3. Inspirational Social Forces (Context; team, coach, family) – INSPIRATION.
4. Achievement and Experience (Recognising and acknowledging that you are good – not in an arrogant way, but that you have worked hard to earn it!) – VALIDATION.

These authors recognise that confidence is embedded in a range of social interactions, the individual, in a particular role, within a particular team, within a larger organisation. This is when confidence building interventions can become very complicated. For example, an individual may have become extremely competent and ‘earned the right’ to be confident. Within the group, they fear negative evaluation from team mates for being ‘over confident’ or arrogant and therefore become unwilling to show how good they are. This can be a big problem!

Equally challenging are the performers who believe themselves to be better than they really are. A performer with a deep robust belief that they are the ‘finished article’ is uncoachable. Often this situation develops because they benchmark themselves against the performance of others. To break out of this, a coach needs to challenge them to find new benchmarks, either self-referenced, “You’re good – but let’s find ways of making you better’ or externally “You’re good but x does this better than you.

This leads me to my final point about confidence, and its relationship with competence. The Dunning – Kruger effect is a humbling piece of research, which was awarded the IgNobel Prize in 2000. The IgNobels are awarded each year for

research which first makes you laugh and then makes you think. What Dunning and Kruger found was that people are often at their MOST confident when they are at their LEAST competent. A failure to see the extent and implications of a lack of skill can make a performer very difficult to work with.

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Q6.5 I am a High School Physical Education Teacher. Most years I see sport performers who have good ability but limit themselves because they have no self-belief and also players who have average ability but massive self-belief. How can I help to give players an accurate view of their ability without undermining them?

First of all, well done for recognising that physical and technical development doesn't always tie up with psychological development. The question revolves around the distinction between confidence and competence highlighted above. In one case we have high competence but low confidence and this is leading to feeling of inadequacy, this unfortunately is linked to young people dropping out of sport altogether.

In the other case we have low competence coupled with high confidence. This is a dangerous combination which can lead to performers becoming uncoachable or unteachable – because they don't believe that can be better than they currently are. An unwillingness to accept that one can become more competent often leads to a lack of objectivity about why things happen – failure is because some else made an error.

Let's look at the extreme examples you give in your question. How to develop the confidence of players with good ability who are doing mental gymnastics to avoid recognising how good they are and seem to maintain their low confidence.

The first question to examine is “what does maintaining low confidence do for them?” – it might help them ‘fit in’ with their peers. It can be difficult for a young person to stand up and say “I'm good at this” – it attracts negative comments and invites people to be critical if they aren't always on-pointe. It may also be a way of anticipating and avoiding perceived failure – “See, I told you I was no good” – this is self-handicapping thinking designed to protect self-esteem.

The way to break into this type of faulty thinking is ensure that the emphasis is always on benchmarking performance against the individual themselves – avoid external benchmarking wherever possible. In this way the outcomes become less important than the processes.

The grid outlined in question 6.1 can be useful in this type of case.

Moving on to the young performer who has less ability but maintains a very high level of confidence. Often in the face of contradictory evidence. Potentially this situation is ‘stuck’ as in the performer doesn't believe they can be better than they currently are and therefore shuts off all avenues for development. This type of ‘overconfidence’ often leads to a complacent; ‘I just need to turn up to win’ type of thinking. Which may actually be true for some of the time. These players may have such a physical and technical advantage at the start of their career that they don't need to work very hard to win. But as they progress in their careers, they have to change or all will be lost.

To break out of this type of thinking we must encourage the performer to recognise that ‘being a big fish in a small pond’ is ok but there is much to be gained by breaking out and working hard to be the biggest fish in the big pond. Again, don't allow the performer to go through the motions in training or in games – set high

standards and goals and identify clear process goals for them to hit. Every training session has a purpose and encourage reflection to ensure that the performer doesn't get into the comfort zone – confidence and competence develop together.

Theoretical Commentary

NB – I pick up several themes in this question in chapter 8 on youth sport.

I have focussed in this answer on the distinction between confidence and competence. Applied practitioners will, in the course of their careers meet performers who, despite the successes in performance, often over many years, report having no self-belief. They are highly competent but report low confidence. They will also meet the converse; performers who report very high levels of confidence with little to back it up in terms of performance.

The main line of theory which help us to understand how this occurs is attribution theory (Weiner, 1985). Attributions are the reason's people give for why things happen. In the earliest conceptualisation of attributions, Weiner proposed that people tended to make attributions around two dimensions – internal and external, stable and unstable. Internal- Stable attributions were unchanging, personal factors like ability, whilst an unstable, internal attribution was effort. External, stable attributions were task difficulty, whilst external and unstable attributions would be luck.

What happens when someone is highly competent but is not developing self-belief is that they are tending to make external attribution for success – I won because my opponent was poor or I was lucky. NOT because I have high ability. This is why we need to reconnect them success and see that the result was a consequence of high ability, it might have also been helped by a poor decision by the opponent but that came about because of what they did. Competence and confidence develop when internal attributions are made.

The converse situation can also be explained in terms of attributions – where a performer continually attributes their own lack of success to external factors – I lost because I was unlucky, or because the task was too difficult. NOT because my ability it low. It is important to straighten this out because if we don't accept that some part of the performance and outcome is down to ability, there is no incentive to train or develop skills.

An understanding of attributions, developing into examining the role of learned helplessness and self-handicapping cognitions is essential for applied practitioners. In many cases it helps clarify the complex relationship between efficacy beliefs and motivation.

References

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Q6.6 What is the most common trait you notice in high level and very driven athletes?

What is the psychological X factor? I could 'fudge this' and say 'mental toughness' and we will be right back to square one with the bag of virtues.

But I'm not going to....I am going to put my money where my mouth is and highlight self-efficacy as the single element which shared among elite and consistent highly performing athletes.

My working definition for self-efficacy is the strength of your belief that you can organise and execute the skills required to achieve your goals whatever else is going on. This covers so many psychological skills and for me is at the corner stone of consistent performance at ones potential at a given time.

For the performer, coach, parent or teacher, the next question is, how do I find out more about self-efficacy and even more importantly how do I develop it.

This is again linked to the grid in question 6.1.

What are the actions which you need to execute to produce the outcomes you want?

Build a list of the 'jobs' you have to do, to get the outcome(s) you want.

Tell me on a scale of 0-10 (0 certain I can't do – 10 certain I can do) how strong the belief is that you can do this job.

This then takes us back to the 'coaching' balance of working on the things you can't do to make sure they improve and working on the thing you can do to keep them polished.

Theoretical Commentary.

There we are, I've said it.... Mental toughness isn't the panacea we all hoped for – it's a headline and below it are the psychological 'nuts and bolts' that really matter.

When pushed I'd put self-efficacy as the most important.

Bandura (1997) defines self efficacy as the "belief in one's capabilities to organise and execute the course of action required to produce given attainment" p.3. However there is a slight 'fudge' in this answer as self-efficacy does cover a range of tasks and skills related to performance. There is an excellent chapter on efficacy written by Beauchamp, Jackson and Morton (2012) which gives an overview of the many different forms of efficacy used in sport. I would highlight self-regulatory efficacy as a link between models of self-regulation, confidence and mental toughness. Self-regulatory efficacy which is an indication of the strength of the belief that a person has in their ability to self-regulate covers so many of the bases tested in performance. It is, in my opinion one of the key 'flags' practitioners should operationalise for themselves and form questions about to pose early in the assessment stage of applied intervention work.

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Q6.7 What's the best way to break out of a slump in performance?

You'll have heard it many times – “form is temporary, class is permanent” – as have I. By common consent it is attributed to Bill Shankly, the legendary manager of Liverpool Football Club, between 1950 and 1974.

What Shankly and all those who cited him are saying is that whilst performances can be inconsistent and unpredictable, what lies beneath; the ability to perform remains constant.

Many players use this to help manage periods where they are struggling to produce their best and are seemingly not getting the results they feel they should be getting or that they deserve.

So what is form? Good form is when a player or team appears to be consistently performing at or near their potential, over a period of time. Poor form or a slump is indicated by the opposite.

But there are also subtleties in this distinction – good form is indicated not just to the outcome but also to the processes. When movements feel automatic and spontaneous, and plans are executed smoothly and without conscious effort or fear, players are more likely to describe this as good form, this is the essence of what Shankly was describing as class – the processes underpinning performance.

So how can we use this knowledge to break out of a slump?

Step 1 is to challenge faulty thinking about winning – good form and winning are not the same thing, an ugly win is still a win. Do not hand your thinking over to fate.

When you are in good form, practice hard, when you are in poor form practice just the same.

Step 2 is to identify and execute the key processes which make you better than your opponent.

These could be individual, unit or whole team skills and techniques which make you a difficult or threatening opponent. Key doing them, irrespective of the score on the score board. If you are winning or losing, you play with the same intensity – it is always nil-nil.

Step 3 is to review your performance and plan for the next opponent.

If you have lost, look at the defeat in context, what can we learn from it to plan for the next opponent.

Finally, accept that there will be periods in a sporting career, where, seemingly for no reason skills are not as smooth as they usually are, and previously effortless performance feels laboured. Resist the temptation to over-analyse, if you have practiced hard and consistently, your central nervous system knows how to do the skill. Relax and let it do its work.

Theoretical Commentary

The descriptions of good form appear to have a great deal in common with the flow state I have described earlier in the text.

Discussions of form and how to break out of period of indifferent or poor form will be very common ground for sport psychology practitioners and it is important that novice psychologists develop a set of assessment questions which determine whether the client is talking about mental factors linked to performance or whether performance is due to technical, physical or tactical issues. Practitioners should carefully avoid straying into the domain of the coach, or any other sport science

practitioner. This is another example of where a multidisciplinary approach to sport performance, involving other sport science and coaching expertise can benefit the client, if consenting.

An applied 'self-help' approach to Slump Busting was published by Alan Goldberg in 1998. In it he identifies issues around self-control, attentional focus, goals setting, managing expectations and fear, developing confidence and using imagery as being important to breaking out of cycle of poor form. I like this book, but it does have the drawback that I've highlighted with several other books of this sort. As there is no interaction with a human psychologist, there is no assessment of which strategy is best for this individual client, presenting with this issue. The client tries to do everything, all at once, and nothing really sticks.

References

Goldberg, A. (1998) *Slumpbusting: 10 steps to mental toughness and peak performance*. Champaign Ill: Human Kinetics.

Q6.8 How can I stay mentally tough? I haven't started a game all season, I usually only get a few minutes on court each week. I train hard and am really committed to the programme but never seem to get a chance.

Sport can be really difficult sometimes. You probably look around and see players who appear to be favoured in ways you are not. They are selected, you train hard and show great commitment, but do not. It seems unfair. You need to manage this thinking carefully, you can quickly get into a downward spiral of negative thought which means that when your opportunity comes you are so weighed down with resentment that there is no chance for you exploit it. Your patience and commitment will probably be rewarded.

There are some key steps to keep you engaged and ready.

1. Challenge your own thinking about fairness.

Many things in sport and life in general are unfair, to expect complete fairness is faulty and unhelpful thinking. What you must do is ensure that when decisions are made there is sufficient evidence to support your case rather than some-one else's. Evidence is usually based what you do, over a period of time. Staying positive and committed is more likely to get you the result you want.

2. Speak to your coach. Ask very specific questions, what do I need to work on and develop to put me in contention for starting selection?

You do need to respect the selection decisions of the coach, there is no need to become frustrated or angry. Coaches often don't like to have this conversation because if you go away and do what they suggest and they still don't pick you, tension can escalate causing further damage to the relationship.

3. Recognise that you might not be the most skilful on the team but you can be the most enthusiastic and committed.

This can be tough, working harder than everyone else but it seemingly not being recognised. But it will be worth it.

4. Recognise that you are one tight hamstring from starting.

As a bench warmer you can switch off, believing that you will never get a chance. Injuries happen all the time – your chance may come at the misfortune of another. But you must be ready – always ready.

5. Warm-up expecting to start every game.

On many occasions I seen players injured in the warm-up and the bench warmer not be ready.

6. Know the play-book and know what the coaches' substitution plans are. Watch how the role you will be filling is developing. If you have a set piece role, analyse your possible opponents, how are they marking, how will you attack them, how do they threaten you? Know when it is likely that you will get on court or pitch. Make sure you are ready, warm-up physically, mentally and technically.

7. Play every play.

Even when you are on the bench, don't switch off mentally. Be ready at 1 minute's notice to be on and playing at 100%.

Theoretical Commentary

One of the first papers published in one of the most prominent sport psychology journals – *The Sport Psychologist* was entitled “The Social Psychology of the Benchwarmer”. Its authors Bob Rotella and Douglas Newberg interviewed three scholarship University level performers with the aim to understanding the psychological challenges experienced by non-starting players.

Rotella and Newberg identified a number of very valuable areas; firstly that a significant amount of the player’s identity is bound up in their role as an athlete. Not starting is a significant threat to this and inevitably leads to a player revising their perceptions of themselves and their commitment to their sport. This can be a profound watershed in a person’s life as it is highly likely that they have moved to their current status as a consequence of being one of the highest performers at a lower level. Going from being a high performer, with all the associated status to being a lower level performer at a higher level can require significant support. Secondly that players found the management of their relationship with the coach problematic – they experienced pain and confusion, that coach who had recruited them to play, was not selecting them. They felt that ‘yardsticks’ by which performance could be assessed were not clear and that players were kept in the dark about selection decisions, to the detriment of the relationship. Finally, performers may overlook the fact that coaches have responsibility for the whole team, keeping this in perspective and finding ways to contribute to the team other than playing may be a way of keeping a reserve player engaged and contributing. Being part of a squad is a fact of life in sport. Most sports now recognise that the bench is an important element of performance. They are tactical options which will probably be used. The psychology of the benchwarmer needs to be revisited to ensure coaches and performers maximise the potential of non-starting players.

References

Dancey, B., & Hudson, J. (2009). A qualitative exploration of substitutes’ experiences in soccer. *The Sport Psychologist*, 23, 4, 451-469

Rotella, R., J., & Newburg, D. S. (1989) The social psychology of the benchwarmer. *The Sport Psychologist*, 3, 1, 48-62

Q6.9 Is there such a things a mentally tough coach?

Yes....

This is a surprisingly poorly researched area, so there is a good deal of opinion but little strong evidence to go on.

You can adapt the list of qualities of mentally tough performers to put together a similar profile for coaches. However there is a bigger issue here – because coaches influence the thoughts, emotions and behaviours of performers in such a profound way, mentally tough coaches also require a very clear understanding of the impact their behaviour has on the performances of others. Because of this I would have right at the top of my list of mental tough coaching characteristics the awareness of the importance of communication and a willingness to develop this as a fundamental tool of coaching.

Once this context has been established – the remaining qualities of mental toughness – around self-belief, clarity and consistency of focus, the ability to cope with adversity and bounce back after a set-back can be applied to coaching as performing.

Theoretical Commentary

All of the qualities listed in the opening section around mental toughness can be equally applied to coaching as to playing. Indeed, there is an excellent source on mental toughness as a generalizable life skill (Gould, Griffes, and Carson, 2013).

Reference

Gould, D., Griffes, K., & Carson, S. (2011). Mental toughness as a life skill. In D. Gucciardi & S. Gordon (Eds.). *Mental toughness in sport: Developments in research and theory*. London: Routledge.

Q6.10 In the list you put up about mental toughness, you say that being able to switch off sport is important. Have you any suggestions about how to do that?

What looks like a combination of virtues – high motivation, perfectionism and mental toughness can actually lead performers to train too hard, too often and under-recover, leading to a range of physiological, medical and injury related problems. Whilst recognising that as sport science has developed and we recognise the importance of training intensity over training volume, performers are still doing very long hours and in some sports are required to perform at high intensity several times a week. The ability to switch off is critical! Rest – mental and physical is part of the programme!

Managing rest and recovery can, in some ways be as difficult as managing your training load. For example, one performer I worked with found that when rest days were scheduled in her training programme, her partner was keen to go out and socialise, which often required more time on her feet. We had to work through a tricky period, where the partner came to understand that recovery for the performer had to be viewed differently. The relationship survived and the performer thrived! I favour a complete switching off from sporting activities – watching games or coaching others doesn't achieve this. I encourage engaging in activities which are challenging and completely different from training and performing. Reading, watching movies and doing sudoku are fine, especially if you need to be off your feet recovering. However I prefer more engaging activities as 'switch offs': For example, I have worked with a performer who switched off by doing a cookery course and then going on to cook meals at home. Another learned a musical instrument – the whole purpose is to give the brain and body some down time and be challenged in a different way.

This is not time wasted.

Theoretical Commentary

There are profound psycho-physiological and medical reasons why performers should integrate 'down-time' into their programme. It would require several chapters on the role of recovery in cardiovascular, musculo-skeletal, endocrine and immune responses to acute and chronic doses of training to do this justice. I am not going to do this. However I do strongly recommend that coaches, parents and performers themselves do educate themselves on why recovery and in particular sleep is vital to the optimisation of most if not all physiological systems.

In terms of psychological downtime – this is an opportunity to revisit Baumeister's work on self regulation. In self-regulation theory Baumeister views volition as being a finite resource, which can be depleted – ego depletion is a term used to explain how when mental energy is low it becomes more difficult to control key cognitions, such as decision making. Taking a break to recover allows the mental resources to regenerate and the task can be completed at higher quality and intensity. Several studies e.g. Furley et al (2013) and Dorris et al (2012) support Baumeister's hypothesis and strongly indicate that optimal mental performance is best achieved when the performer is mentally fresh.

But...in some sports, it is important to be able to perform complex cognitive tasks under conditions of ego depletion, for example, driving a F1 car, for 2 hours at speeds of over 200mph whilst sitting in a cockpit with a temperature of over 40 celcius.

Finally, it should be noted that recent reviews (Hagger et al, 2010 & Carter and McCullough, 2014) have questioned the role of ego –depletion and raised some important questions about the mechanisms by which limited resource models of psychological control operate.

The key take away message remains – in difficult and engaging physical and mental tasks breaks are important!

References

Baumeister, R.F., & Vohs, K.D. (Eds.) (2004). *Handbook of Self-Regulation: Research, Theory, and Applications*. New York: Guilford.

Carter, E.C., & McCullough, M.E. (2014) Publication bias and the limited strength model of self-control: has the evidence for ego depletion been overestimated? *Frontiers in Psychology*. 5:823

Furley, P., Bertrams, A, Englert, C., & Delphia, A. (2013) Ego depletion, attention control and decision making in sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*. 14, 900-904
Dorris et al (2012)

Hagger, M.S., Wood, C., Stiff, C., & Chatzisarantis N.L (2010). Ego depletion and the strength model of self-control: a meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*. 136(4):495-525.

Pulling the threads together.

Non-psychologists quite rightly become frustrated and confused when psychologists use the different names for psychological constructs which appear to be the same or very similar. Positive psychology, mental toughness, self-efficacy, self-belief, self-regulation, hardiness and resilience appear to be examples of this. There is considerable debate as to how these ‘fit together’ and relate to other psychological constructs. This is the kind of question which is of technical interest to the academic but of less importance to the applied practitioner. I would love to be the person who can solve the puzzle, aligning the models presented in this chapter and develop a single simple method of assessing self-belief, mental toughness, hardiness, resilience etc, reliably, with sound validity and objectivity. Such a feat would certainly earn the recognition of my peers.

But pragmatically as an applied practitioner I am less concerned. It is not essential that we have this consensus – we will still probe and question around our client’s view of mental toughness, what-ever we call it. How we proceed in the work with our client is determined by their understanding not ours.