

OVERVIEW

“The whole thing is never to get negative about yourself. Sure, it's possible that the other guy you're playing is tough, and that he may have beaten you the last time you played, and okay, maybe you haven't been playing all that well yourself. But the minute you start thinking about these things you're dead. I go out to every match convinced that I'm going to win. That's all there is to it.”

- Jimmy Connors

Every player and coach know, or should know, that psychology has an incredible effect on performance. Furthermore, many elite players believe that optimal performance at the top tier of competition is more mental than physical.

However, very few players and coaches include mental training in their programs. Professional players employ coaches and biomechanists to work on technique, physiotherapists to work on injuries, and strength and conditioning coaches to work on fitness, yet very few employ a sport psychologist to work on mental toughness.

What is Mental Toughness?

“Mental toughness is 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 opponent in remaining determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure.” (Jones, 2002)

Participants in the study highlighted twelve attributes that were believed to be key attributes of the ideal mentally tough athlete. The attributes below are presented in ranking order of each attribute's importance:

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 to succeed.
3. Having an unshakable self-belief that you possess unique qualities and abilities that make you better than your opponent.
4. = Having an insatiable desire and internalised 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.

Since there are so many different factors which determine attaining mental toughness, the following section will focus on the mental skills most commonly used by coaches and psychologists.

References

Jones, G. (2002) What Is This Thing Called Mental Toughness? An Investigation of Elite Sport Performers. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 14(3): 205-218