



ASK THE EXPERT

How to Win the Mental Game

MARK HIATT, PH.D.

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST, DARTMOUTH COLLEGE HEALTH SERVICES

Hiatt works with the Peak Performance Program, helping athletes flex their mental abilities along with their muscles. He says task-focused attention, or the ability to focus and sustain attention on the right things at the right time, is one of the most important—if not the most important—mental skills in sport and performance. He recommends mindfulness breathing strategies, in which you bring all of your attention and focus to your breathing, to get you into the moment as much as possible. Here are some more of Hiatt's tips on how to get into the right mindset for the big game.

—*Rianna P. Starheim '14*

SET GOALS

"Make them specific, easily measurable, challenging but achievable and time-limited. Create a goal map by setting long-term, or 'milestone,' goals, mid-range goals to benchmark progress, and focus goals, which are specific, behavioral objectives to work on. A milestone goal might be finishing a marathon, and you can work toward that with a mid-range goal of running a certain distance or time and a focus goal of training a certain number of times a week."

KEEP A LID ON IT

"Every athlete needs a certain level of competitive energy, but if your level of anxiety is too high you won't perform well. Identify which kind of emotions and what level of intensity have led to your best performances in the past. Often athletes need a different level of competitive energy and focus for practices than they do for games. Relaxing your muscles and mind and controlling your breathing can help you slow down and focus during competition."

TALK TO YOURSELF!

"Good competitive thinking is simple and focused on specific behaviors. Identify negative-thinking patterns that have been difficult for you in the past, and consciously focus your energy on productive—not negative—thoughts for practice and competition. When preparing for competition reflect on questions such as, 'What will this situation be like?' and 'How do I want to respond?' instead of negative thoughts such as, 'I hope I don't mess up' or 'What if I don't perform well?'"

VISUALIZE

"Practice visualization strategies, such as spending a few minutes before an event rehearsing exactly how you would like to perform. Spend time rehearsing specific behavioral actions, such as hitting a baseball, as well as responding to general situations, such as playing a point in a squash match. With these visualization exercises, try to make the images as vivid as possible and incorporate all of the senses as you imagine the situation."