



“Psychological Preparation for Wrestlers and Coaches”

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“**P**eople do not plan to fail..... they fail to plan.” This is a quote that I used to hear my high school coach say all of the time. The quote speaks volumes of not only athletics, but also real life. People who fail to plan are usually not the most successful people.

If there is one thing that I have learned about coaching this great sport of wrestling, is that it is about 99% psychological. For Melvin Douglas (1996 & 2000 Olympian) fans, you may have seen his 1993 World Champion t-shirt that states this theory on the back of the shirt. Wrestling does require so many physical elements, but it takes a well-balanced and consistently trained mental preparedness to make these physical elements successful.

Wrestling requires so much work, that it takes a special person to survive through the sport. A wrestler must be mentally and physically tough. Many wrestlers have no problems with the physical side, but can often struggle with the mental side and more often than not, will fail. The good thing is that progression comes with failure.

As a coach, you must be able to help your wrestlers grow not only as great technical and conditioned athletes, but also as athletes that have tremendous “psychological stamina.” Wrestlers that can prepare themselves for any situation on and off the mat possess this type of mental skill. This will make each of your wrestlers much more successful, which will in turn make your team successful.

The significance of this article is that I feel that wrestlers are always looking for “an edge”—that something extra that will make them winners. Unfortunately, many wrestlers overlook the fact that a good base level of skill, tremendous work ethic, and commitment are necessary before having the “edge” will ever make a difference.

Let us see if you or one of your wrestlers is personally familiar with either of the following scenarios:

Scenario #1— It’s the first match of the day and your opponent is someone who is evenly matched to you skill-wise. As you get closer to match time, you have a feeling of nervous anticipation, but also of quiet confidence. You know that you are in great shape and you just got done drilling for about 25 minutes with a teammate. You are warm and sweating good from the drilling, but you feel loose and energized rather than tired. You win the match 5-2, noticing that your opponent seemed rigid and unprepared; and you begin to wonder why you were concerned about this match. Your confidence is boosted further, and you look forward to an enjoyable day of competition.

Scenario #2— It’s the first match of the day and your opponent is someone who is evenly matched to you skill-wise. As you get closer to match time, you have a feeling of tightness and fear. You did not get a chance to drill or warm-up, and you discover that maybe you did not have the best week of practice and that your body or mind may not be prepared for this match. As you approach the mat, you feel a cold and nervous sweat trickle down your sides. You are so pre-occupied with worry about your readiness, that you wrestle the match in a daze, hardly moving as your opponent thrashes you 5-0. You sprint off the mat, demoralized, trying to “put yourself back together” for the next match.

Chances are good that if you have wrestled or coached for several years, that you have experienced variations on both of these scenarios. I hope

2003 Jeff Reese Tournament - 152 lb. finals. Nate Phillips, Shikellamy, Pennsylvania, was decisively won by Andrew Scolaro, Campbell-Savona, New York 8-14. Photo by Sonja Stanbro.

that scenario #1 has occurred for you more often than scenario #2. Scenario #2 is obviously the result of not being psychologically prepared for competition, and most likely not prepared during training either.

Psychological preparation for wrestlers begins with training. A wrestler must be able to focus, set goals, and perform a so-called "mental drill" when training. Practice is not just used to condition and drill technique. A successful wrestler must also practice their mental skills while training.

Training has traditionally been viewed in terms of the physical side. Meaning that skills are taught in practice and the wrestler practices the skills. Historically, physical training has been the predominant method used for helping wrestlers to improve their performance...this of course is no secret.

However, at increasingly higher, more elite levels of competition, where techniques and physiological conditions of wrestlers are more evenly matched, the differences between winning and losing become much narrower. Therefore, any little extra edge in performance is extremely important.

At such high levels of competition, say for example the Olympic Games, physical preparation alone may not be adequate because it is most likely going to be the

wrestler with better psychological stamina and preparation, which distinguishes between winners and losers.

The ultimate and most accurate definition of psychological preparation in its most general form, is to develop a psychological state which will allow the wrestler to fully realize the potential of the physical technique, conditioning, and overall readiness that he or she achieved in training in order to succeed in competition.

Therefore, it is obvious that there are two parts to a wrestler's psychological preparation...TRAINING and COMPETITION. Most of the psychological preparation takes place during the training phase in order to prepare for upcoming competitions. When an athlete is training for a competition, there are certain objectives that the wrestler must obtain: 1) to define their competitive goals, 2) to create the conditions needed to achieve these goals, and 3) to build their confidence in a strong performance.

These three objectives need to be put into place by the head coach. This type of training will help develop wrestlers that can learn from their own mistakes and then analyze what they did wrong and correct it. These are skills and activities that many coaches do not utilize or may not even know about. The gains are tremendous and will help build a team towards

winning ways.

Now that we know what psychological preparation is all about, let us talk about some steps that you can implement as a coach, in order to get your wrestlers on the track towards an effective psychological stamina. Let me set a stage in which most of us are familiar. This will help with competition preparation starting from the day before you leave for a wrestling tournament, through the travel day, the day before the event, and the competition day.

Day Before Departure

- Practice for about an hour and fifteen minutes. Drill mostly, get in about two matches, and hit some sprints.
- While you are drilling, picture your opponents. Think about the ones that you have already wrestled before. Visualize what you want to accomplish during the competition.
- During your training matches, set small goals for yourself. Get in one easy match and one hard match. Push yourself both mentally and physically.
- Just wear a t-shirt and shorts during practice. Do not make weight an issue.
- Leave practice at about 3 lbs. over.
- Go home and rest. Just sit and think about your goals for this competition.
- Focus on what you want to accomplish

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- Watch video of previous opponents or watch T.V. in general, or play on the Internet.
- Go to bed early and eat some fruit, pasta and fluids that night.

Departure Day

- Wake up early and get in about a 2-mile run. This will get your system jump started for the day. This will be beneficial since your workout will be short.
- Travel can take its toll both mentally and physically. Depending on the length of the trip, bring something to occupy yourself. You do not want to sleep a lot, because too much sleep can make you tired later.
- Stimulate your brain with music, conversations with teammates, or just sit and visualize yourself wrestling in matches and being victorious.
- On arrival, get in another workout. It should be light, about an hour. It should consist of warm-up drills, jogging, sprints, technique drilling, and one 3-minute match.
- Be within at least a pound the night before weigh-in. You want to focus on your wrestling goals, not making weight.
- Go to bed by at least 10 pm.

Competition Day

- Plan to arrive at the venue, about a half an hour before weigh-ins. This will give you ample time to check your weight and perform any necessary running that may be needed.
- After you make weight, do not pig out. Eat smart. Take in a fair amount of water, at least 32 oz. Also, eat some fruits such as oranges, cantaloupe, or bananas. Some nutritious cereal is good for carbohydrates or bagels are also good for carbs. Eating these types of foods will give your body what it needs to operate correctly, satisfy hunger, and keep your weight in a manageable position.
- During the first part of your warm-up, you should be wearing your full warm-ups. Start your warm-up at least one hour before competition starts.
- Start out with a light jog and then develop the jog into a series of sprints. This can be very intimidating to other wrestlers as they watch you prepare with such intensity and focus. Keep this up for about 15-20 minutes.
- Once you feel loose and warm, have a light sweat broke, stop jogging, and spend about five minutes stretching.
- After you stretch, peel off your outer layer of warm-ups down to just a pair of

shorts and a long sleeve t-shirt. This will allow you to get a proper drill without restrictions.

- Start out your drill routine slow, hitting every aspect of the techniques. Build into a faster pace drill. You should drill for at least 20-25 minutes. Make sure that you have a good drill partner. This is very important.
- After your drill session, get in at least one 3-minute live match. This will give your cardiovascular system a good blow and you will get that first match out of the way. After the three-minute match, put your full warm-ups back on and find somewhere to sit alone and just relax and think about the day.
- You should be physically prepared now. This would be a good time to check out your bracket and scout the competition for the day. Plan your route to success.
- When your first match is called, just take about 10-15 minutes to get warmed back up again.
- YOU ARE READY!

Following these methods of preparation for competition will not guarantee success, but you will be much more likely to have a successful competition if you follow a pre-competition strategy similar to the

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one I have just described.

Pre-competition preparation is the easy part. We need to prepare before the competition, such as in practice or training. As a coach, you need to implement certain strategies and activities that will help build these psychological skills in your wrestlers. During the training process of a wrestler, there are certain key elements that can be used to help in the development of these skills. The following are six ways that I have found to be effective in developing the psychological preparation of my wrestlers.

1. Competition Information—getting information about the upcoming competition is important, especially about the athlete's likely opponents. Evaluating the conditions of the competition is highly individual; it depends on the wrestler's psychological qualities. You have to find out the wrestler's level of stress towards an opponent or a particular competition.

2. Modeling—in training activities, to model the conditions of the future competitions or opponents is highly desirable. Use this as much as possible. Put your wrestlers into real situations. Also, try to use workout partners who wrestle in a manner similar to that of your wrestler's probable opponents.

3. Spotlight Training—some wrestlers practice well, but do not compete well. In order to help these athletes as well as your whole team, you can use what I call Spotlight Training. This type of training method will help their adaptation to complex conditions, such as important tournaments or duals. This will happen by raising the emotional intensity of the practice, by doing things such as: having VIP's present in practice, imitating filming and T.V. coverage, rating the quality of training activities, having more matches in practice with singlet, officials, and spectators, creating more fun in tournaments and matches, and much more. These are some activities to help develop their skills by putting them in real situations.

4. Individualizing—wrestlers are individuals and their training processes need to be set up especially for them sometimes. Individualizing a wrestler's training process relative to their temperament is done by adapting the negative and positive aspects of their temperament to the training and competition activities. It is impossible to develop a wrestler's individual style without the wrestler himself participating interestedly, actively, and consciously. Figure out what works for the individual by observing, experimenting, and having discussions with the individual.

5. Make Suggestions—a wrestler's psychological state during a workout or even a competition can be optimized by making suggestions. A lot of coaches make suggestions to their wrestlers, but sometimes it may be the wrong time. The nature and content of suggestions depends on the individual and the psychological state in certain situations. The amount and frequency of suggestions should be interlinked with the course of training or a match. The use of suggestions is most effective in an equal match-up; it is least effective in a losing situation; and in a winning situation, it should be used at a medium level.

6. Imagery—this technique is widely used for psychological preparation in practice, competition, or before an event. Have your athletes visualize what they want to accomplish in practice or in a match. Have wrestlers set goals. They must then see

themselves accomplishing those goals. Imagery really helps build self-confidence as well as motivation.

Overall, in the training of wrestlers with an unbalanced sense of confidence, most of the attention should be focused on building a conscious, responsible, highly positive attitude towards training; on striving to master techniques; on developing the skill of disciplined behavior, the ability to analyze situations, to think critically, and to voluntarily lower one's level of anxiety before a big match.

All of these situations, steps, and examples are ways that you the coach can implement psychological development into your practices to better develop your young wrestlers in not only preparing physically, but mentally towards competition and training. I hope that this article will help you build the total package in developing wrestlers. This package includes technique, conditioning, and psychological skills.

Most coaches obviously want to build champions. We are clearly not in this great sport for the money, yet we put so much time and effort into what we do, so that we may better build our programs into championship caliber teams. Therefore, if you are one of the coaches that want to build a championship team or you have wrestlers that you know want to become the best, then implement these psychological skills into your coaching style. It will help you grow as a coach and help your wrestlers become "CHAMPIONS".



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