

# 7 Principles to Peak Performance

If we were to peer inside an athlete's mind while he was in the middle of a great game, we would consistently find a number of predictable mental elements present. The presence of these mental components creates the special INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT within the athlete that enables the peak performance to happen, fuels the athlete's motivation, and keeps him involved in the sport over the long haul.

**Having a general awareness of these performance elements is absolutely ESSENTIAL for your success as an athlete, coach, or parent.**

If you can deliberately integrate these elements into your daily training and competitions, then you'll be well on your way to achieving a mentally and physically tough strategy that can only lead to excellence and success.

**Here are 7 principles to peak performance:**

## 1. FUN

If you think this only applies to children's sports you are totally wrong! Fun is by far one of the most basic and important principles in both peak performance and motivation. Whether an athlete plays at a professional level or competes in recreational sports, if he is not having fun then there is absolutely no way he can perform to his potential. Fun keeps an athlete loose and relaxed. Fun helps an athlete stay properly focused. Fun enables that athlete to keep the competition in perspective and not get too caught up in the intensity. Fun helps that athlete maintain his motivation and work ethic. Fun is probably the simplest, yet most often overlooked basic ingredient of peak performance and athletic success. Remember that as you progress in training and seriousness to ALWAYS maintain an element of fun and enjoyment in the sport.

## 2. High self-esteem

There is a direct relationship between self-esteem and peak performance, as one goes up so does the other! The more confident an athlete is about his abilities and potential, the better he'll perform, plain and simple. The reason is that a LACK of self-esteem is a major DISTRACTION. An athlete who's mind is filled with doubts, fears, and thoughts is not going to be able to access the level of concentration necessary to perform at their best, that kind of concentration is only accessible when an athlete can stop thinking and instead totally connect with the *experience* of what they're doing. When self-esteem is present the mind is unburdened and is free to stay in the NOW of what's happening. Do everything you can to lift self-esteem and just watch how quickly performance improves.

## 3. Process, not outcome focused

What a player focuses on before and during a game will either make or break her performance. Being outcome-focused going into or during a competition is probably one of the most glaring and costly mental mistakes an athlete can make. When an athlete's focus is distracted by worries about winning or losing, the score, her reputation should she fail or anything to do with the outcome, then she is setting herself up for failure or a weak performance. Coaches who overstate the importance of winning inadvertently contribute to their team's losing effort. The "process" represents the ongoing, moment-by-moment action within the game. The major difference between an outcome and process focus is CONTROL. An athlete has total control over the process of the performance and almost no direct control over the outcome of a game. Staying focused on what the athlete can control – doing their best, paying attention to the ball, communicating with teammates, etc. – will keep them in the present and will boost the performance, ultimately making it more likely that the outcome will also be better.

#### **4. Free to fail and make mistakes**

One of the classic characteristics of an athlete in the middle of a peak performance is a complete obliviousness to the possibility of failure. The player is free from worries about making mistakes or losing. As a consequence he is able to stay completely relaxed and properly focused, and is more able to use his skills, be creative, and play up to his potential. This is why an athlete or team will always tend to play their very best when they have absolutely nothing to lose, and that's exactly what happens when an underdog pulls off a big upset. On the other hand, athletes who worry about making mistakes or losing will always play tight and tentative. The critical issue here is in how you deal with your athlete's mistakes. Remember that mistakes and losses are feedback, and feedback is an OPPORTUNITY to learn and improve.

#### **5. Challenged, not threatened**

Sometimes coaches or team captains will use threats in an attempt to motivate their teams into action, but this only leads to negative consequences. A threat is always presented in the "if you don't do A" (win/score a goal/dominate an opponent, etc.) then "B" (a physical/emotional punishment or loss or privilege) will happen (i.e. if you don't start or play strong offense, you don't deserve to be on this team/will have to practice after the game/will sit out of the next game). Threats rely on external punishment or the avoidance of pain as a source of motivation, and though they occasionally work, more often than not they completely backfire. Alternatively, CHALLENGE is a form of INTRINSIC MOTIVATION that is far more powerful because it calls upon the inner desire and passion for an emotionally meaningful goal. Rather than triggering stress and tightening, challenge triggers a deep inner drive for personal greatness.

#### **6. Automatic/non-thinking**

When athletes at any level perform to their potential, one common characteristic of their mental state is a "quiet mind." These players perform with very little conscious thought. Instead, they have the experience of "being on automatic" and letting the game come to them. When this happens, an athlete's unconscious mind or muscle memory takes over and directs their performance. The result is a flow experience sometimes referred to as "the zone." Thinking is helpful in assessing performance during or after practice, in reading and studying, or in setting goals or strategizing plays, but it should be avoided like the plague during competition!

#### **7. Relaxed mentally and physically**

In order for an athlete to perform to his potential he must be at an optimal level of excitement/nervousness going into the game. In other words, he must be excited for the game, but not too excited. Once the game starts however, the athlete must be mentally and physically relaxed. The relaxation allows him to execute with perfect timing and mechanics. Athletes and teams choke under pressure for one, very simple reason: they get too nervous/excited before or during the game. The result is physical and mental tension, which hinders their performance. There are many ways to stay cool and calm in the clutch, including avoiding pressure from others, avoiding distractions, focusing on the breath rather than thoughts, stretching, etc. The more you can do to stay relaxed during competition, the more agile your body will be and the more clear your mind will stay in order to make key decisions in the heat of the action.