

Tsukuba Summer Institute

Mental Skills Training for Athletes & Coaches: Developing Mental Plans

MENTAL PREPARATION PLANS

When developing mental preparation plans, coaches should have their athletes answer the following questions:

1. How will you get focused for practice or competition?

- What are your goals for this practice or competition? What do you want to accomplish/focus on?
- Do you have a focus cue word or phrase for this event?
- What type of imagery would help you focus better?

2. How will you develop a positive mental attitude for practice or competition?

- How will you keep your goals challenging but realistic?
- Does your self-talk script create a strong and positive mental attitude (PMA)?
- Do you have a PMA cue word or phrase?
- What type of imagery might create a good PMA?

3. How will you develop an optimal level of self-confidence for practice or competition?

- How will you use your goals to develop optimal self-confidence?
- Does your self-talk script create optimal confidence?
- Do you have a self-confidence cue word or phrase?
- What type of imagery helps you create an optimal level of confidence?

4. How will you develop optimal arousal for practice or competition?

- How will you use your relaxation and energizing skills to create optimal arousal?
- How will you use your goals to enhance your optimal energy level?
- How helpful is your self-talk script in creating optimal arousal?
- Do you have an optimal energy cue word or phrase?
- What type of imagery helps you achieve optimal arousal?

5. How will you develop motivation to push your limits for practice or competition?

- How will you use your goals to enhance your motivation?
- How helpful is your self-talk script in enhancing your motivation?
- Do you have a motivation cue word or phrase?
- What type of imagery helps you achieve optimal motivation?

6. How will you combine this mental warm-up with your physical warm-up?

SEE THE PREPARATION PLAN DEVELOPMENT FORM AT END OF DOCUMENT

SAMPLE MENTAL PREPARATION PLAN (100-Metre – 400-Metre Runner)

Main mental strengths: Good level of motivation and self-confidence

Main weakness: Pre-race anxiety (and therefore sometimes too slow out of the starting block)

Step 1 (about 80 minutes before the race)

- *Check in/register for the race*
- Physical warm-up: Stretching – the first stretch is the trigger to begin mental preparation plan
- Mental preparation: (1) *Goal setting* – set a target for the time you'll finish with; set a goal to explode out of the starting block (2) Control anxiety level with *deep breathing* and *cue word(s)*

Time: 5 minutes

Step 2 (about 75 minutes before the race)

- Physical warm-up: Easy jog
- Mental preparation: (1) *Imagery* – imagine other racers in their lanes and focus on your race plan (2) *Imagery* – imagine running with perfect form; focus on body feelings (3) Listen to personal *self-talk* script to focus only on positive thoughts

Time: 10 minutes

Step 3 (about 65 minutes before the race)

- Physical warm-up: Static stretching
- Mental preparation: (1) *Breathe deeply* with each stretch; focus on getting muscles loose (2) Control anxiety with more *deep breathing* and *cue word(s)*, and focus on your race plan (3) Maintain self-confidence with *positive self-talk* and quick *imagery* clips of key moments of the race

Time: 15 minutes

Step 4 (about 50 minutes before the race)

- Physical warm-up: Dynamic stretching
- Mental preparation: (1) *Imagery* – feel strong and powerful in your legs; imagine driving your legs and running with perfect form

Time: 8 minutes

Step 5 (about 42 minutes before the race)

- Physical warm-up: Practice strides
- Mental preparation: (1) *Imagery* – imagine accelerating with a strong and quick first step; imagine staying low (and do it in your practice strides); imagine your transition to a taller stance (and do it in your practice strides); imagine feeling physically charged but mentally calm (2) *Positive self-talk* to stay confident, maintain motivation, and block out anxiety

Time: 12 minutes

Step 6 (about 30 minutes before the race)

- Physical warm-up: Race simulation (of the start; and the first corner if 200m or 400m race)
- Mental preparation: (1) *Imagery* – imagine other racers beside you; imagine feeling energy from the other racers and from the spectators (2) *Goal setting* – repeat the time target you set for yourself and focus on the explosive start you want

Time: 7 minutes

Step 7 (about 23 minutes before the race)

- *Washroom break*
- Mental preparation: (1) *Relaxation exercise* to reduce pre-race anxiety

Time: 4 minutes

Step 8 (about 19 minutes before the race)

- Physical warm-up: More dynamic stretching
- Mental preparation: (1) *Positive self-talk* to stay confident and motivated (2) *Imagery* – stay focused on your race plan (don't let other racers or events distract you)

Time: 4 minutes

Step 9 (about 15 minutes before the race)

- *Isolation – lie down in the shade, away from others*
- Mental preparation: (1) *Positive self-statements* about your readiness to race (2) If necessary, *relaxation exercise* to stay calm (3) *Imagery* – imagine energy running through your legs; see yourself exploding out of the starting block; stay focused on your race plan (4) Repeat *cue words* as reminders for an explosive start and for running form at different stages of the race

Time: 10 minutes

Step 10 (about 5 minutes before the race)

- Physical preparation: Set up the starting block and do three starts
- Mental preparation: (1) *Goal setting* – repeat your target time and your goal to explode out of the starting block (2) *Imagery* – imagine feeling strong/explosive out of the starting block; focus once more on your race plan (3) *Positive self-talk* about readiness (4) *Energizing exercise* to get muscles charged (5) Repeat *cue words*, finish with the word “compete”

MENTAL PERFORMANCE PLANS

Mental performance plans help athletes in the following ways:

1. ***Standard performance plans enhance performance when things go according to expectations***
 - They form the foundation of athletes' mental approach to practicing and competing.
 - They focus on athletes' goals for practices and competitions.
 - They provide specific action plans for maintaining a *flow* mindset.
 - They include periodic checks (at specific times during a race/routine or self-paced task, and during scheduled breaks in interactive sports) of athletes' mindsets so that mental skills/techniques can be adjusted if needed (to maintain a flow feeling). This when you might switch to your *back-up plan* (see below).
2. ***Back-up performance plans address common situations that can reduce performance quality***
 - Of course, *standard mental performance plans* are helpful, but *back-up plans* are often the key to success because they prepare athletes to handle problems that arise *frequently*.
 - They deal with specific and *predictable* problems, and should be rehearsed extensively to enhance chances of success when such problems arise.
 - Due to time constraints, only two or three back-up plans can usually be developed and used.

Races and Routines

In races and routines, the competitive task does not change a lot from one race (or routine) to another. Generally, the *uncontrollable* factors are things like weather or quality of opponents, so performance plans can be developed with minimal modifications for each race/routine.

- The first step is to divide the race or routine into 3-7 meaningful parts, depending on the length (e.g., the start, the first 400m, the middle 700m, and the last 400m of a 1,500m race).
- Then, develop *goals* and an action plan for each part. For example, for the first 400m, the goal might be simply to stay with the pack of runners and run at a 65-second pace – and applicable cue words might be “relax, stay with the pack.”
- Next, choose appropriate cue words for each part of the race or routine (e.g., “explode” at the start of the race; “lunge” at the end of the race).
- You could also decide what cue or *trigger* you'll use to begin each part of the race/routine.
- *Back-up plans* should be used to deal with bad weather, strategy mistakes (e.g., going too fast or too slow at the start), and non-optimal feelings (e.g., feeling lethargic or worried about opponents).
- For such problems, decide what cue or trigger you'll use to implement your back-up plan and how you'll re-divide the race/routine into parts. Also, decide what kind of cue words and/or self-talk you'll use to re-establish your desired feelings.

Self-Paced Tasks

Self-paced tasks involve repetition of the same or similar movement patterns. Accordingly, there are two main parts in mental performance plans for these types of activities.

Pre-Performance Routine

- The purpose of the pre-performance routine is to create a flow mindset that becomes *automatic* and allows you to *trust* your body and skills. An example of a pre-performance routine is the pattern of steps that a basketball player follows before a foul shot – he/she takes one deep breath (*not two or three*), bounces the ball three times (*not twice, not four times*), takes another deep breath, does two knee bends (*not one, not three*), and shoots.
- Again, there should be a *back-up plan* in case circumstances change (e.g., the competition is delayed, the weather turns bad, or something else occurs that causes the athlete to lose focus).
- For such problems, identify the cue or trigger you'll use to implement your back-up plan. Then, set new goals and choose an action plan to regain a flow mindset based on the new circumstances.

Between-Performance Routine

- This refers to what athletes do in the time between performance moments (e.g., for a golfer, the time between his/her opening drive and the next shot that he/she has to take). A good between-performance routine should allow the athlete to *relax* – this helps him/her to retain confidence and a flow mindset. An example of a between-performance routine for a golfer is to count his/her steps while walking from one hole to the next, or to continually flip a coin in his/her pocket and feel it with the fingers, trying to determine if it is 'heads' or 'tails.'
- Between-performance routines are necessary because it is virtually impossible to stay completely focused throughout a competition – to give their nervous systems proper rest breaks, athletes need to know how and when to turn their concentration on and off (this also applies to breaks in play during *interactive sports*). Triggers can be used to initiate between-performance routines.
- Between-performance routines contain three (3) main components:
 - (1) **React** – use *relaxation* and *self-talk* strategies to develop a *composed* reaction to your previous performance (regardless of whether it was a good or bad performance) in order to stay calm and balanced.
 - (2) **Reflect** – quickly reflect on your previous performance and learn from it, but don't take too much time on this. Then use a cue or trigger to end your reflection and move on to the next step (e.g., when a golfer puts his/her club back into the bag; when a volleyball player turns to face the net).
 - (3) **Refocus and Ready** – after the cue or trigger above, go back to your *pre-performance routine* to focus on the next task and perform it *automatically*.

For both pre-performance and between-performance routines, *cue cards* (with written reminders or cue words) can also be used to help develop, maintain, and/or regain a flow mindset. An example in soccer comes from the 2006 World Cup – Jens Lehmann, Germany's goalkeeper, had a cue card in his sock that he referred to before each Argentine player's kick during the penalty shootout in the semi-final.

Interactive Sports

In interactive sports, the nature of the athlete's task is always changing according to the quality of the opponents and the offensive/defensive strategies they use. Therefore, they are less predictable than the other types of activities, and as a result, mental performance plans for interactive sports can be more difficult to develop. In this case, performance plans should focus mainly on two things – (1) responding systematically to anticipated critical situations or events (during practice or competition), and (2) reacting to specific good and bad performance moments.

- The first step is to identify 4-8 *important or common situations* that occur during practice or competition.
- The next step is to select 2-4 *good and bad performance moments* that typically occur during practice and competition.
- Then, set goals and develop action plans for each situation/moment. For example, a soccer team might set a goal of defending well (e.g., not allowing the other team to shoot) to deal with high arousal in the first ten minutes of a game, and use relaxing self-talk and cue words to elicit automated physical responses.
- Cue words or triggers could also be used to initiate those action plans or action plans associated with other situations or moments when they arise.
- *Back-up plans* should be used to deal with bad weather, bad officiating, audience behaviors, performance mistakes, unfair/cheating/dirty opponents, an angry coach, a slight injury, etc. However, back-up plans should only be developed for two or three of the most common and most difficult of these situations.
- Again, you should decide what cue or trigger you'll use to implement your back-up plan in these situations, and what kind of cue words and/or self-talk will be most helpful.
- In sports that have breaks in the action (e.g., tennis, volleyball, American football), athletes can also develop some *between-performance routines* like the ones described for self-paced tasks. In this case, the "*react*" and "*refocus/ready*" principles are similar, but "*reflect*" has to be done even more quickly.

SEE THE PERFORMANCE PLAN DEVELOPMENT FORMS AT END OF DOCUMENT

MENTAL RECOVERY PLANS

Coaches and athletes can't always anticipate *every* problem that might arise, so mental recovery plans provide a *general coping strategy* to help athletes recover from unexpected problems, particularly when their goals become unattainable or they lose their composure.

- A mental recovery plan is a single, all-purpose solution with a set procedure for getting back on track after a *disaster or catastrophe*. It is meant to salvage as much benefit from the practice or competition as possible.
- Although recovery plans *sometimes* allow athletes to completely return to form, they *usually* just provide a means of "damage control" and help athletes take away something positive from a negative event.
- The extent of an athlete's recovery depends on how quickly he/she identifies the need to use the mental recovery plan and how effectively it is then implemented.

The following five steps are recommended for mental recovery plans:

1. Develop a physical trigger to start the recovery plan.
2. Relax and adjust your arousal level.
3. Revise goals so that they are realistic for the current (new) situation.
4. Use positive self-talk and self-statements to reduce stress, increase positive mental attitude, and raise self-confidence.
5. Imagine regaining a positive mindset and achieving your revised goals.

SAMPLE MENTAL RECOVERY PLAN (*Basketball*)

Sample Situation: Michael Jordan is playing a game for the University of Edinburgh. However, after a good start, the opposing team has just scored 14 straight points, 10 of them by the player that Jordan is guarding. Jordan starts to panic. He's frustrated, he has lost his composure, his confidence is low, and he's focusing on what a bad defender he is. Not only has he lost his flow mindset; his overall performance is now far below his usual level. As soon as possible, Jordan needs to use his *mental recovery plan*.

The following are five steps that Michael Jordan could put into his recovery plan:

1. Cue the recovery plan with a *physical trigger* – un-tuck your shirt, then tuck it back into your shorts (have a mental trigger as an alternative – an image of a red traffic light, to *stop* the catastrophe).
2. To relax, use a deep breathing strategy along with a cue word (“calm down”) to reduce arousal.
3. Revise your goals so that they are realistic for the current (new) situation. In this case, the new goals are to (1) prevent the opponent from shooting from his favourite spot, (2) force him to his left (his weaker dribbling and shooting side), and (3) be more physical in fighting through screens (pick-and-roll) in order to stay with your man.
4. Counter negative thoughts by reminding yourself, “I am a good player who just isn't playing well at the moment.” Emphasize that if you play harder and smarter, as you did at the start of the game, you'll defend your man better and start playing better offensively as well. Remind yourself that no matter how the game finishes (whether you win or lose), *the main objective now is to play well and regain a positive/confident mindset*.
5. Use quick imagery of (1) how you want to play, and (2) achieving each of your new/revised goals (i.e., imagine yourself preventing your man from shooting, forcing him to his left, and fighting through screens). Also, imagine yourself helping out your teammates if they are beaten by their men.

After initiating his recovery plan, Jordan should start playing better. Even if the team doesn't manage to turn things around completely (and win), Jordan's recovery plan will help him (and the rest of his team) play well for the remainder of the game. This should raise confidence again and should prompt Jordan (and his teammates) to continue developing and using a mental recovery plan.

MENTAL & PHYSICAL PREPARATION PLAN DEVELOPMENT FORM

Identify the sequence of your physical and mental warm-up routines, and look for ways to combine them. Write out each step, and make sure that your *mental* warm-up helps develop high levels of *focus & concentration, self-confidence, positive mental attitude, and motivation*. Also, make sure to get your arousal into your *optimal energy zone*.

Crucial Steps in Physical Warm-up Routine	Time Required	Concerns	Crucial Steps in Mental Warm-up Routine	Time Required	Concerns	Combined Physical & Mental Warm-up
1)						
2)						
3)						
4)						
5)						
6)						
7)						
8)						

MENTAL PERFORMANCE PLANS – Race/Routine Plan (Sample Development Form)

You can use the following model to develop physical and mental goals, and cue words, for each segment of the race/routine. Remember that you should also create a back-up plan to overcome possible difficulties.

Race/Routine Segment	Race/Routine Segment Goals		Cue Words
	Physical	Mental	
Example: Start of race	React quickly, stay low, drive hard; be one of the leaders out of the blocks	Focus only on the starting gun; think positively; be confident at start	“Explode,” “low,” “drive hard,” “I always get great starts”
1)			
2)			
3)			
4)			
5)			
6)			
7)			

MENTAL PERFORMANCE PLANS – Self-Paced Task Plan (Pre-Performance Sample Development Form)

First, identify your current pre-performance routine; then look at the *required* steps for such routines (below). Next, make any necessary additions to your current routine; then write out your final (combined) routine. Include as much detail as possible, but make it short enough to fit within the time constraints of your sport.

Steps in Current Routine	Concerns	<u>Required</u> Steps for Pre-Performance Routine	Additions of Required Steps to Routine	Final Routine - Combined Current and Required Steps
1)		Step 1: Relax and remove unwanted tension from performing muscles		
2)		Step 2: Use goals and self-talk to promote focus and concentration		
3)		Step 3: Adjust arousal to ensure you're in your optimal energy zone		
4)		Step 4: Use imagery and positive self-talk to become confident to perform your best		
5)		Step 5: Develop a positive mental attitude that is stress-free but challenged		
6)		Step 6: How will you maximize a highly automated, feeling-oriented performance?		
7)		Step 7: Streamline the routine to make it quick, effective, and consistent to implement		
8)				

Then use the three-step process (REACT, REFLECT, and REFOCUS & READY) to develop a between-performance routine for your sport.

MENTAL PERFORMANCE PLANS – Interactive Sport Plan (Sample Development Form)

You can use the following model to develop physical and mental goals, and cue words, for critical situations and good/bad performance moments. Remember that you should also create a back-up plan to overcome possible difficulties.

Pre-Determined Critical Situations	Situation Goals		Cue Words
	Physical	Mental	
Example: First 10 minutes of game	Emphasize defending well to take advantage of high arousal level	Focus on being relaxed but aggressive; try to be intimidating; keep things simple at start	“Be quick but don’t hurry,” “be aggressive but in control,” “be unselfish and put the team first”
1)			
2)			
3)			
4)			
Reactions to Good and Bad Performance Moments	Situation Goals		Cue Words
	Physical	Mental	
Example: Opponents score quick goal	Play in control to prevent giving away ball; be more patient; increase defensive pressure on opponents	Focus on increasing energy and motivation; restore confidence and positive self-talk	“Poise,” “composure under pressure,” “pressure them into hurrying,” “Nobody gets past me”
1)			
2)			
3)			
4)			