

The Mindset and Tactics of a Champion

This is one of the most exciting times of the year because the season ending tournaments are upon us. Every high school athlete is striving to have a peak performance at the regional and state tournaments, while the college guys are looking to turn it up a notch for the Conference and NCAA Championships. I have been attending the NCAA Championships annually since 1982 and the competition is intense.

My most vivid memories from my wrestling career are undoubtedly state, national and Olympic competition. Of course, in order to excel in those events I was wrestling in hundreds of tournaments over two decades. Over 90% of what I remember is from the season-ending events. Winning my first State Championship is one of the most intensely satisfying experiences I have ever had on the mats. I was 15 years old and it was the culmination of a boyhood dream. When I made the Olympic Team I was already an adult. It was definitely very fulfilling, but different from winning my first state championship.

Towards the end of the season I tell the high school athletes that I work with "What you achieve at the state tournament will become memories of a lifetime". Over time, no one will remember exactly what your regular season record was. Throughout your life people will ask, did you get to state? Did you place? These season's ending tournaments are your chance to shine. If you give it your all, you will have no regrets regardless of the outcome. RISE TO THE OCCASION!

So how do you "Rise to the Occasion" in your biggest matches? Few athletes perform at the same level in major competition as they do during the season. Unfortunately, many athletes tighten up and hold back. Great champions are able to get the most out of themselves when it counts! Champions perform at their "optimal level of emotional arousal" and do the little things necessary to win the close matches. Below are some simple suggestions, in no particular order, which will help you win your big matches when it counts the most.

Intense drilling will help you perform instinctively in the heat of battle.
Fight for every point in the practice room.

Always think positively, particularly during the weeks and days leading up to major competition.

Visualize yourself executing your game plan, winning against your toughest competition, and having your hand raised in the championship venue as your cheering section cheers.

Study videotape of some of your best matches. This will help you visualize and think positively.

Get proper rest and nutrition. Control your weight so that you can focus on your performance.

Warm up properly before matches. This helps prepare your body for battle, while helping reduce anxiety.

Be intense, yet relaxed, when you step on the mat to do battle! Over time, champions learn to develop a routine that allows them to consistently get to their optimal level of mental arousal level prior to matches. Each athlete is different. Coaches must help athletes identify when they were performing their best and what their mindset was going into the match.

Keep wrestling through the end of every period. Strive to finish every period on top and definitely not on bottom!

Never relax on the edge. Too many athletes get knocked on their butt on the edge and give up quick points. This is a critical error. I encourage my athletes to wrestle in the center and to know where the

edge is. You are much better off if you can see the edge as opposed to having your back to it and being vulnerable. Wrestlers should circle in immediately when pushed near the edge.

Stay focused no matter what happens. Too many athletes get visibly frustrated if they make a mistake or get a bad call. Do not do this! Get right back in there and keep plugging away to score and win.

Be tough when you are tired! We can talk technique and tactics, but when it comes down to it, you must execute your technique and tactics during the final moments and seconds of close matches if you are going to reach your highest goals. Once your season is over, assess what you need to do to improve. Make and follow a training plan that will allow you to live your dreams.