

Training for Mental Toughness

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Recently I was asked by the US Olympic Committee's Sport Psychology Department & Athlete Services Division to prepare a luncheon workshop on Mental Toughness. Mental toughness is a topic I write about often but can't express enough how important it is.

What is Mental Toughness? By definition, toughness is to be strong & resilient; able to withstand great strain without tearing or breaking." Mental toughness to me is being able to reach your Ideal Competitive State (ICS) on command.

What exactly is your Ideal Competitive State? Your ICS is your personal state of being that allows an individual to perform with their greatest potential. It is a state of being where an individual feels most energized, most confident and most strong. A state where you are generating positive emotions that help you be most alert, instinctive, responsive and creative. When you have that positive fighting attitude and are enjoying the battle (competition).

There are several emotions that can block your potential such as fear, confusion, low energy, fatigue, and helplessness. When you feel these negative emotions you should practice changing your mindset. This is when you must practice creating the positive emotions mentioned in the previous paragraph. There are everyday situations that can challenge your ICS: Lack of sleep, which makes you sluggish & tired; referees that make bad calls; girlfriends/boyfriends that break up with you; pressure from school/work/family...

Toughness is being able to create these positive emotions upon command, thus enabling you to bring all your talent & skills to life at that moment, no matter what negative thing(s) might be affecting you.

An example of this for me was in the 1984 Olympics, the night before I wrestled Frank Andersson. He was a powerful, golden-haired athlete, who enjoyed the status of a movie star in Sweden and who had claimed the World Championship in 1979, 1981 and 1982.

With his great strength and technique, his quickness, and his superb sense of balance, Andersson had devastated his first three opponents in these Olympic Games. Each of Andersson's foes had served as a foil for his most breathtaking and crowd-pleasing throw, the high arcing "Back suplex". Andersson was flamboyant, a thrower who could literally hurl his foes out of contention. I was unspectacular, a grinding, physical fighter who pounded his opponents into exhaustion. Andersson was the international wrestling community's pick to win the Olympic title. I was considered a long shot.

Needless to say, I went to bed that night a bit nervous. I had won my previous two matches earlier in the day but in the morning I would face my biggest challenge of my entire career. Frank Andersson had already been quoted in the LA Times saying "Since beating the Greek earlier today, now nothing stands in the way of my winning the Gold Medal."

So as I lay in bed, I focused my mind not on winning or losing, but on only things that I could surely control. You can't always control winning and losing but I knew I could control the pace and the intensity of the fight. I wanted to make the match exciting for the American crowd. I visualized myself defending the "Back suplex", Andersson's most powerful weapon. I saw myself stopping this spectacular throw over and over. Finally I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, Frank Andersson and I came together in the center of the mat and shook hands. Then the referee blew the whistle, and the first period began. I came out sprinting, just as I had planned. Just as I had planned, I scored on Andersson almost immediately with my favorite throw, my slam headlock. Fifteen seconds into the match, I swung my right arm through the air and slammed my shoulder across Frank Andersson's neck, and hurled him down onto the mat. The blow came so fast and with such power that Andersson had no chance of stopping it. Having thrown him down, I was unable to hold him on the mat... he was so strong. Instantly, he was back on his feet. I was leading,

amazingly, 3 points to 0. My quick score was certainly unexpected, and the crowd, which was 95% American, screamed furiously.

Moments later, I tried the headlock again. This time, he stopped me and I slipped and fell to my belly. My botched throw not only earned Andersson a point from the referee, it gave him a chance to try the suplex as I fought for position down on the mat.

What followed then, I believe, was the turning point of the match. It all happened so fast. Frank Andersson got his hands underneath me and began to lift. The crowd was screaming. I remember thinking, "I've just got to fight!". For a second, my feet were off the ground, and then I adjusted and got my toes barely on the floor. At this point, all my knowledge of technique went flying out the window. I just gritted my teeth and got as tough as I could get. I was like a frenzied animal caught in the jaws of a trap. Survival was my only concern. I was going to claw and writhe and do everything I could to survive.

I twisted and thrashed so violently that Frank Andersson had to set me down. Then, deliberately, he lifted me again. And again he raised me slightly off my feet. This time I turned into him. I faced him. I didn't think to myself, "Oh he's lifting me so I have to turn into him.", I just did it. It wasn't necessarily a classic defense, but it was the only thing I could do at the time. I think it shocked him. and it worked. We both fell down on the mat.

Frank Andersson, his arms still locked around me, lifted me a third time and tried to turn me in a different direction. I fought like a tiger and for a third time I rebuffed him. It was furious and frenzied. The whole episode lasted 45 seconds. The match itself was only one minute old.

The referee then blew his whistle to stop the action, and Andersson and I separated. I had survived. Perhaps I had done more than just survive. As I backed away from him, my head up, he remained on his knees for a moment, holding his back. Then he stole a few seconds so he could catch his breath. I don't know whether he had really hurt his back or whether he just needed a little rest. I do know that lifting someone like that three times without success can take a lot out of you. I knew it must have taken something out of him. It said a lot to me, too. I thought, "Yeah, I stopped him".

I went on to beat Frank Andersson that day by a score of 4 – 1. The Los Angeles Times called one of the biggest upsets of the LA Games.

I trained many years preparing for that moment. Being able to control my Ideal Competitive State at the time I needed it most was crucial in me performing to my potential. This took a lot of practice throughout my career.

How do we practice and improve our ability to kick in to our "Ideal Competitive State" upon command? First you have to determine your own personal ICS. Think back on a great performance – how great it felt, how fun it was... These are the feelings you want to be able to recreate on command.

Next time you are feeling down or have low motivation before practice, take advantage of it. This is a great time to practice controlling your ICS. Become a great actor! (Anyone can act out how they really feel). Remember, your body helps your mind and vice versa. Concentrate on your body language - smile, walk straight, head up, shoulders back – look confident. Include a light skip to your step. If you force your body to act "alive and positive", it will tell your mind that you are "alive and positive". Same with your mind...think positive thoughts - think of all the good in your life (family, friends, life in sports). Thinking positive thoughts will help to get your body in a positive mode.

Perfect the "Mindset". No Complaining! Nothing can bother you! Nothing can break you! No matter what your coach throws at you. No matter what your opponent does. No matter what the situation. Nothing can rattle you. And all because you're too tough, too resilient, too focused! Just like the dictionary definition of toughness, "you are able to withstand great strain without tearing or breaking!"

Put yourself in adverse practice situations and overcome! Imagine being behind in score, a victim of a bad call, your opponent is cheating, the more you can overcome the better the training. Toughness is learned - make no mistake about it! If you are not tough...it just means you need more practice. Just like learning or perfecting a technique or skill, toughness can be learned, refined and honed.

No matter how old or young, weak or strong...you can be tougher! Never believe that you can't achieve because you are not talented enough, smart enough or weren't given gifts to succeed. Your future is much more dependent on the decisions you make and what you do than on what you are genetically made up of. Believe me, the level of toughness you acquire through toughness training will be the most powerful FORCE in your athletic career as well as your life!