Lesson #1: How to Achieve Maximum Confidence Under Pressure

In this 4 week online training program, *The Courage to Win: Mental Toughness for Sport - Perform Your Best Under Pressure*, you will learn exactly how to communicate with yourself so you can unleash your true athletic genius and realize your dreams in sport.

For over 14 years I’ve worked with thousands of elite athletes from many sports to help them gain the competitive edge. In that time, I’ve learned exactly what does and does not work to win.

We’re going to talk about how to win. We’re also going to talk about how to overcome our habit of using mental strategies that do not work.

- **There are 4 mental tendencies of competitive athletes you’ll have to manage...**

  1. **Our negative feelings.** Our fear, our performance anxiety, our frustration, our anger.
  2. **Our tendency to self-criticize.** This is our tendency to over-criticize ourselves when we lose, under-perform, or choke.
  3. **Our blame.** Our tendency to blame coaches, teammates, parents, and spouses who are not supporting us.
  4. **Our arrogance.** This is our insistence that we are ‘right’ in how we approach competition and our close-mindedness to trying new things.
Here are 10 Mental Strategies That Fail—Yet Athletes Always Try

1. The first is to ignore or try to eliminate your negative fears and feelings.

2. The second is to accept yourself when you win and criticize yourself when you lose. This always fails.

3. The third is to think about the outcome of your competitive event (i.e., winning or losing) while competing.

4. The fourth is to avoid facing your disappointment when you fail by suppressing it. This only sets you up for future losses.

5. The fifth is to be ill-prepared for situations that might distract you from your proper focus.

6. The sixth is to subconsciously blame your coach, teammates, or parents for your failures.

7. The seventh is to quit or just ‘go through the motions’ of competing without discovering why you lost your motivation in the first place.

8. The eighth is to change major patterns at big competitions to try and give yourself ‘the edge’.

9. The ninth is to set unrealistic performance goals.

10. The tenth is to over-train in the hopes that you will win through sheer physical preparation.

This Training Program Will Show You How to Gain The Edge

What all athletes (including your competitors) are doing is focusing on winning. They’re wondering how they can look good to spectators, coaches, and teammates. They’re wondering how to stop themselves from choking. Most of all, they’re wondering how to avoid losing.

These impulses are a big disadvantage to winning. They are a big disadvantage because they put pressure on you.

Your edge will come from approaching your competitive self differently than your opponents.
You are going to be different. You are going to learn the mindset of a champion, which means you are going to learn exactly how to approach yourself as a unique individual.

In part, you are going to do this by learning what the world’s best athletes have done to be successful. You are also going to learn about you: what works for you and what doesn’t.

**How to Achieve Maximum Confidence under Pressure**

Great athletes are not people who perform well under pressure. *Nobody* performs well under pressure.

*Great athletes are people who create an internal environment for themselves in which they do not feel overwhelming pressure.*

**How Athletes Pressure Themselves**

There are two main ways athletes pressure themselves:

1. **They believe they MUST win in order to accept themselves.**

2. **They tell themselves it is “not Ok” to feel negative feelings such as performance anxiety, fear, shame, or deep disappointment.**

3. **They ask themselves for outcomes they cannot control, such as performing flawlessly or winning.**

Putting pressure on yourself is another way of saying that *you love yourself when you succeed, and you hate yourself when fail.*

You may not be consciously aware of this phenomenon, but if you observe yourself carefully, you’ll see that it is true. Consider your most painful failures for a moment. I suspect the hurt of these failures is really the emotion of *shame.*

**Shame is the emotion we experience when we criticize ourselves for being powerless to get what we want.**

When we lose or make errors, we criticize ourselves because we did not have the ‘control’ to win. When we choke, we criticize ourselves for not having enough power over ourselves to be confident.

In all these situations, we feel weak and powerless. Then we criticize ourselves for being weak and powerless.
The key to reducing pressure on yourself is to accept yourself even when you are powerless to get what you want—whether it is winning, a peak performance, or confidence.

Accepting yourself means shifting your mindset to one in which you are not pressuring yourself. Here is how to do it:

1. **Decide that you really, really want to win, but you do not need to win to like yourself.** Decide that the cake is the joy of expressing yourself in sport. Winning is the icing.

2. **Decide that it is perfectly Ok to feel any negative feeling.** Negativity is part of life, and it is certainly part of competing. Decide that it is natural to feel anxious, fearful, and disappointed sometimes.

3. **Ask yourself for outcomes you can control.** For example, if you are a badminton player, instead of asking yourself to win a point against an opponent, you can ask yourself to watch and determine how your opponent is trying to score against you. Winning a point is not under your control, but figuring out his strategy is.

By making these three major shifts, you will re-discover the love of the game, reduce pressure on yourself, and begin to reach your potential.

**The Starting Point of Reducing Pressure: ‘Want, Not Need’**

Stacy Wilson, captain of the Canadian Women’s Olympic hockey team, said “Everything changed the moment we stopped saying as a team, ‘We have to win’. We just started saying, ‘We want to win.’ Suddenly, everybody relaxed and started to play her game.”

The main thing I want you to realize and learn—the thing that will give you tremendous, unbeatable advantages against all your competition—is that you don’t NEED all the things you think you need to accept yourself and experience the joy of sport. Winning, looking good to others, having a peak performance, and being confident are lovely, but they are not necessary for you to accept yourself.

You must learn to relate to these things as desires, not needs, because you cannot control them.

If you could control winning, you would always win. If you could control your performance, you would always be on your ‘A’ game. If you could control your feelings, you’d always feel confident, happy, and optimistic.

When you realize you don’t need any of these things to accept yourself, you can relax. As you relax, you lose your performance anxiety and have fun. You start delivering peak performances and enjoying them.
It’s a paradox: the moment you stop needing to win, the more you win.

Why not test this idea by recalling your best performances? Think about the last time you were ‘in the zone.’ I’ll bet you weren’t tense, stressed out, or worried about winning. My hunch is that you were having fun and expressing yourself, and the win took care of itself.

This is the true psychology of winning.

Mark Tewksbury: ‘Want, not Need’

Mark Tewksbury, one of the finest athletes Canada has ever produced, did a number of things to get himself to a place of ‘want, not need’ before winning the gold medal in the 100 metre backstroke in the Olympic games.

…the world had become much more competitive. The medals, which used to be shared by 8 countries, were now finding their way to more than 25 nations.

This made a big impact on me. On the first day of swimming I was shocked by the results. Because it was so close and there were so many surprises, it became clear that anything could happen.

On the second day of the swimming…there was another close race at the pool and I thought to myself, ‘Hmm, silver would be good.’ I wasn’t giving up but it was so close there were absolutely no guarantees. Even legends like Matt Biondi, the world record holder in the 100-metre freestyle, were leaving the pool without going to podium. It seemed as though it would be a feat simply to win any medal.1

The first way Mark took pressure off himself was to view a silver or bronze as success, not failure. So the first step for him was deciding that he didn’t need to win gold to feel successful. Mark continued this shift when preparing for his final.

The American, Jeff Rouse, was favoured to win, but Mark was swimming well, too. Mark set his sights on winning, but took a low-pressure approach within himself. Instead of saying, “I’m the best, no one can beat me, I should win,” he merely said to himself, “Somebody had to win this race. Why not me?”2

This simple phrase is a perfect example of the ‘want, not need’ philosophy. “Why not me?” is a beautiful thought. It is optimistic and confident—but wonderfully absent of the pressure athletes normally put on themselves. This focus gave Mark the relaxed yet energized focus he needed to deliver a peak performance.
What About “Whatever It Takes to Win”?

You’ve probably heard motivational stories from successful athletes who say repeatedly that it was their drive to win that put them on the podium. You may be wondering, “Does the ‘want, not need’ philosophy contradict the ‘whatever it takes’ mentality?”

Absolutely not. When I talk about relaxing, I’m referring to your on site focus while competing.

Preparing to win is a different matter. If you sincerely want to be the best athlete possible, the ‘whatever it takes’ orientation of champions is a must for you.

Earlier I talked about Mark Tewksbury and how he arrived at a ‘want, not need’ attitude towards winning the Olympics. But Mark also had the ‘whatever it takes’ mentality. For example, Mark knew he would have to stay off his legs as much as possible. But in the Olympic village, it is impossible not to walk around—you need to walk to the cafeteria, the bus stop, etc.

Mark knew that the only away to avoid stiffness and fatigue would be to become used to walking before he got to the village. So here’s what he did:

“Three months before we left Canada I forced myself to stop driving to and from the pool and started walking. My house in Calgary was a thirty-five minute walk from the pool, compared to a five-minute drive. It added an hour to my working day, and at first my legs were really sore, but the more I walked the more my legs got used to the exercise. At the end of the month I was completely adjusted to walking regularly...The village in Barcelona turned out to be even bigger than the one in Korea which I thought was enormous. We all had to do a lot of walking, but this didn’t stress me out because I knew that my legs were conditioned for it.”

You can be a highly motivated athlete and still invoke the ‘want, not win’ philosophy. In fact, you must be highly motivated, because it’s your commitment to quality training that gives you the skills and conditioning you need to win.

But on the day of competition, you must be relaxed. And the only way to do it is to adopt a ‘want, not need’ mentality. You really want to win, but you don’t need to win to like yourself. And to be relaxed, you need to think of winning as a desire, not a psychological need. Winning is the icing; the cake is self-acceptance.

Self-Acceptance: How You Can Get To ‘Want, Not Need’

The focus of today’s lesson is to help you get to a place of ‘want, not need’ when it comes to winning, performing well, or being confident. How can mental toughness help you with this?
When it comes to sport, the *Courage to Win* is your ability to **perform your best under pressure**. You do this using the elements of mental toughness. The first element of mental toughness is self-acceptance.

**Self-acceptance allows you to stop placing excessive pressure on yourself when you compete.** You are going to learn how to truly accept yourself, perhaps for the first time in your life.

- Here are 4 strategies you can use to enhance your self-acceptance and reduce your performance anxiety.

1. Stop pressuring yourself to be confident and positive 100% of the time.
2. Stop over-criticizing yourself for lacking confidence, making mistakes, or losing.
3. Start channelling your negative emotions constructively while competing.
4. If you fail, open up to your feelings of disappointment once the event is over. Rid yourself of the irrational fear of negative feelings.

**Stop Pressuring Yourself To Be Confident And Positive 100% of the Time**
---And Watch Your Performance Fall Into Place

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**Mental Toughness Exercise #1**

Answer the following question with total, ruthless honesty.

Out of the 100% of the time you spend competing, what percentage of that time do you expect yourself to feel positive, optimistic, and confident?

**Write down your answer in the space below.** Your thoughts will reveal how you approach competing.

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If you’re like most athletes, you expect yourself to be confident 70-80% of the time **no matter what’s going on in the competition.**
Did your answer reflect this? If so, you’re not alone.

Virtually every athlete I’ve worked with starts out with the same goals for mental training:

- **To deliver peak performances and win by:**
  
  1. Eliminating fear and performance anxiety, and
  2. Learning how to be consistently confident while competing.

If your goal is to eliminate performance anxiety, you will always be unhappy, because this is an impossible goal to achieve. In fact, if you’ve ever tried to eliminate fear, anger, or performance anxiety, you know how ridiculous a concept this is.

**The Truth About Negative Emotions**

The first truth is that we can neither eliminate nor control negative emotions.

The second truth is, you can expect to feel frustrated or fearful approximately 50% of the time you are competing.

Does this surprise you?

Does this disappoint you?

You cannot eliminate negative feelings because the purpose of your negative feelings is to help you navigate through life. Emotions are your sixth sense: they are a sophisticated warning system that helps you navigate life. Consider an experience I had 13 years ago:

In 1988, I broke my leg playing my sport. I dutifully waited 3 weeks and started playing again. After that, I hobbled around my University campus, confused about why my leg continued to hurt. My doctor kept assuring me that I was healed—until I visited a sports medicine clinic, which diagnosed me with severely strained ligaments. The pain was an indication to me that I was still injured…my body’s way of telling me to sit down for a few more weeks.

Painful feelings are no different from painful limbs. They are your body’s way of communicating to you about how to navigate life. Feeling anxious before you compete is good: these feelings activate you and keep you alert for the challenges ahead.

There’s another reason why you will never succeed in eliminating negative feelings from competition.
When you are competing, you are going to experience negative emotions because competition is a war.

In 1988, hockey superstar Wayne Gretzky was traded from Edmonton to Los Angeles. Eventually Wayne had to go back to Edmonton and play against his old teammates. Here are some of his recollections:

Sooner or later I had to go to the one place I really wanted to avoid...It was a game I dreaded...I saw Sather [Edmonton coach Glen Sather] before the game and he didn’t say a word to me. He’s pretty honest that way. I didn’t exist because I was on the other team now. He’s not phony about it...I told reporters before the game I thought Mess would check me, but I was wrong. He steamrolled me, backed up and steamrolled me again. The guy is a competitor and this was a game he wanted to win...Now I know why people cringe at the sight of him.

In your sport, you may not be competing against an opponent, but you are still asking yourself to be heroic by executing without error. Even golf is a war. It’s a war of control. You are trying to control something that fundamentally cannot be controlled (the ball).

It’s essential that you change your goal from eliminating your negative feelings to integrating and channelling them in competition.

The world’s best athletes do this instinctively. Alex Baumann, Canada’s double gold medallist in swimming, knew he was mentally ready to race despite ongoing self-doubt:

I felt physically ready for the Olympics. The training, the taper, and the times I was swimming indicated that I was ready. I was also mentally ready. I knew I was ready, but there are always doubts before a race. There is always a question of whether I can do it or not.

Baumann not only acknowledged his performance anxiety. He also acknowledged his negativity and pessimism:

My heart was pounding because of the pressure and I was unable to sleep between heats and finals. Then at night, I felt terrible in the water. I thought, ‘Here goes eleven years of work and here I come and get a silver medal. I really wondered if I could ever win feeling that bad...

I knew that I could win if everything went well, but I felt terrible going into the warm-up. That’s a terrible feeling because you feel off and your warm-up times show it....I think that really scared me...
I received a rubdown and went in the water again in an outside practice pool on our way back, about 20 minutes before my race. I tried to work on stroke technique. I just had to loosen up. I was tense because there was a lot of pressure and I could not sleep in the afternoon. I felt much better after loosening up in the water, and my confidence returned.

The day of the 400 IM was not the best day for me, even though I did break my world record and won a gold medal.  

Baumann didn’t enjoy his negative feelings, but he was experienced enough to grasp that they are part of competing. This kept him from panicking over his lack of confidence, and he loosened up his mind by loosening up his body.

**Why Trying to Get Rid of Fear Causes You to Choke**

Negative feelings are instinctive, energetic responses that arise deep in the unconscious mind. They arrive unbidden and without intention on your part.

Negative feelings are energy. As such, they follow one simple rule:

*What you resist, persists.*

If you resist an energetic force, it will intensify.

Put a lid on a pot of hot water, and it will boil. Tell a crying child to be quiet, and she will wail louder. Tell yourself not to eat chocolate (resist your desire for it), and you want it more. Order yourself to go to sleep (resist your impulse to stay up), and you will lay awake for hours.

Remember, feelings are a sophisticated warning system designed to keep you responding properly to the challenges of life. When it comes to competing, your nerves exist to keep you energized and highly alert. This is why trying to get rid of your performance anxiety causes you to choke. The more you tell yourself to stop being afraid, the more these feelings fight for life, and the more afraid you become.

**Why Criticizing Your Fear Destroys Your Confidence**

As long as you criticize your fear of failure, you cannot get to your good feelings of confidence and relaxation.

Telling yourself, “I can’t be anxious today—I NEED to feel confident” is criticizing yourself. It’s criticizing yourself because you are afraid, and you’re telling yourself it’s not OK to be who you are. Yet, the tension inside you is not created by your performance anxiety. It is created by your self-criticism and shame over your anxiety.
As long as you are busy criticizing yourself, you cannot praise yourself. Confidence and optimism are good feelings towards yourself based on self-praise.

When you tell yourself you are a great athlete, this is self-praise. When you tell yourself you are mentally ready, this is self-praise. If you are busy telling yourself that your mental state is wrong because you are afraid, how do you imagine you will be able to start praising yourself?

It’s impossible. *Self-praise cannot start until self-criticism ends.*

Fear, self-doubt, and performance anxiety (while annoying) do not have to be a problem for you if you learn how to handle them.

**Stop Over-Criticizing Yourself So You Can Relax and Win**

The first thing you must do is become aware of your self-criticism. As you bring it into conscious view, you will naturally ease up on yourself.

**Mental Toughness Exercise #2**

In the space below, write down your worst fear as an athlete.

For example: A free-style kayaker told me that one of the worst fears of a kayaker is “swimming in a competition.” In kayaking, “swimming” happens when you flip your boat upside down and can’t roll it back up. It is embarrassing because kayakers believe that any respectable kayaker should be able to roll his boat back up (even though this isn’t always the case...many expert kayakers have gone swimming!).
Mental Toughness Exercise #3

Rank the following situations from 1 to 5 in terms of how each one would affect you. 1 represents a major negative effect and 5 represents a mild negative effect.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Ranking from 1 to 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You lose a competition.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You become very anxious and lose your confidence while competing.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>You are fatigued and perform poorly as a result.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>You have a bad start to your event and do not recover.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>You feel cranky and negative and are curt to the people in your competing environment (e.g., teammates, coaches, etc.).</td>
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Mental Toughness Exercise #4

Think of a recent time when you did not perform well and it was traumatic for you. Re-run that scene in your mind, recalling the emotions you felt at that time. Write down in a paragraph below all the thoughts and feelings you had at that time. Imagine you are telling a trusted friend (which I hope to be for you) these things in great detail. Practice self-acceptance by refusing to censor or edit your thoughts.

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________________________________________________________________________
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Thank you for completing these assignments. Next week, when you receive Lesson 2, you will also receive my coaching supplements on the assignments you just completed. You can review your answers against my coaching at that time. 😊

Your friend,
Lisa B.

Lesson 1 Footnotes