

PERFORMANCE POINT

MENTAL PERFORMANCE

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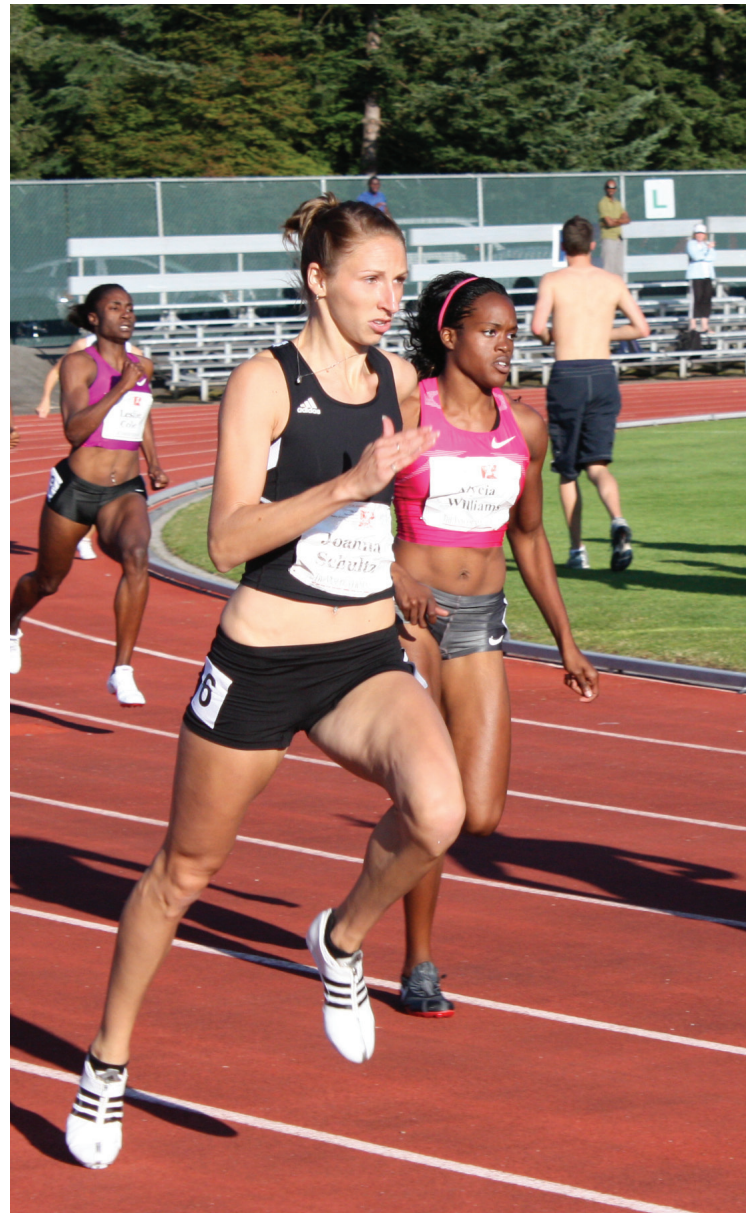
'What is this thing called Mental Toughness?'

This is the title of an article written by colleagues in the UK following a piece of research conducted by Professor Graham Jones (Jones et al., 2001 Journal of Applied Sports Psychology) who explored the notion of mental toughness with World and Olympic Champions through one-to-one or focus group interviews. We frequently hear the term Mental Toughness used in sport, but according to Jones, there is a general lack of conceptual clarity and consensus as to what it means. As a result of their conversations with these athletes, a definition and six key attributes emerged as key elements of the mental development and performance of every athlete, coach and even performance directors and support staff.

Everyone involved in the world of sport, and particularly athletes and coaches, are required to deliver excellent results – even through times of personal and sport related pressure. The ability to perform is as much about a developed mental toughness as it is about your skills, physical ability, knowledge and experience. Mental Toughness is about maximizing your effectiveness and sustaining performance at all times. This approach to mental toughness helps athletes develop their mental performance and for coaches to help create the conditions for athletes to demonstrate greater mental toughness.

As a result of the research done by Jones, a definition emerged: 'Having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to cope better than your opponents in the many demands (training, competition and life) that are placed on you as an athlete, and be more consistent and better than your opponents by remaining determined, focused, confident and in control under pressure'. The key message within this definition is the belief that we can all learn to become more mentally tough – that this is not just about whether we were born with it, or not. Certainly the degree to which it can be developed may vary from person to person, but the understanding is that with the recognition and knowledge of the key components, mental toughness can be developed.

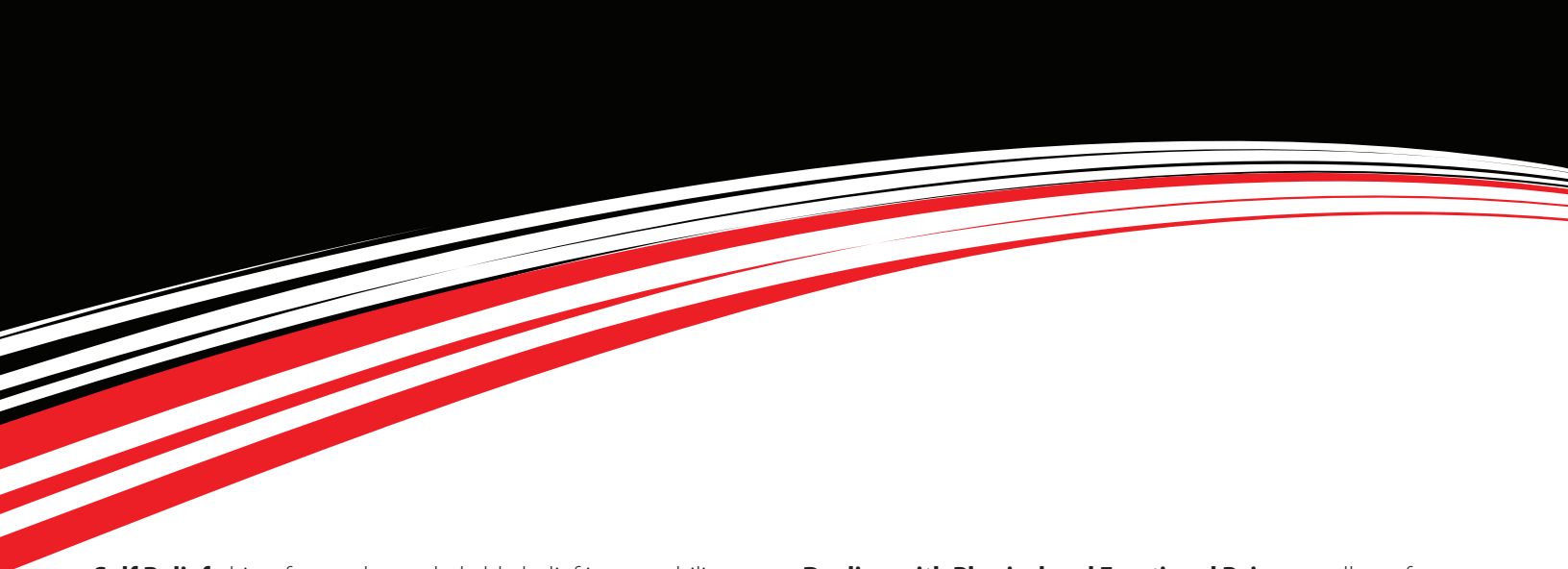
These key component or attributes crucial to sustaining high performance in sport are Self-Belief, Motivation, Focus and Handling Pressure, Dealing with Physical and Emotional Pain, and Lifestyle. The information generated by the research has enabled a greater understanding for each of these key attributes;



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Self Belief; this refers to the unshakable belief in your ability to achieve competition goals and the belief you have about your own unique qualities and abilities that make you better than your opponents.

Mental skill to help develop Self Belief: Keep a training log. Developing self belief is about creating the evidence about why you should believe in yourself and what you are capable of. This, in its simplest form, is about getting out and doing what you need to do and then documenting this in some way so that over time you can see in 'black and white' the work you have done and previous results you have produced.

Motivation; is defined as the insatiable desire and one's internalized motivation to succeed as well as the ability to bounce back from performance setbacks with an increased determination to succeed.

Mental skill to help develop Motivation: Set goals. There are many things that can impact one's motivation but at the heart of what you are trying to do and achieve will come down to your ability to identify why you are doing this, what you have to do to be successful and how you are going to do this.

Focus; many things can affect our ability to remain focused, therefore the ability to not be distracted by others' performance or your own internal-voice distractions, to remain fully focused on the task in the face of competition specific distractions or being able to regain focus following unexpected events and finally having the awareness to know when to switch on and off as required, are all important.

Mental skill to help develop Focus: Positive self talk and re-focusing strategies. These are good tools to have in case your focus starts to shift away from what you are doing, or the little voice in your head starts telling you, "you can't do this". Having effective and strategic words/phrases/prompts that can be visual, verbal or physical can help keep you or bring you back to the present moment and the task at hand.

Handling Pressure; pressure in some form will play a role in any performance, it is imperative you find a way to thrive on the pressure and use it to your advantage while accepting that it is inevitable in competition.

Mental skill to help develop Handling Pressure: Performance routines. A tremendous amount of familiarity and calmness can come from doing what you know works in terms of your pre-race or competition preparation routine. Taking a moment to think about previous great performances and how you prepared, and then being able to create a framework for yourself to repeat that preparation environment/mental state can make the difference on the day.

Dealing with Physical and Emotional Pain: regardless of your sport there is always the need for determination to push through any kind of physical, mental or emotional challenge. Therefore, it is crucial to be able to push through 'barriers' while maintaining technique and effort in both training and competition. This attribute also recognizes the importance of overcoming 'failure', when your goals haven't been achieved.

Mental skill to help develop dealing with Physical and Emotional Pain: Within your training program, creating opportunities to work harder or for longer than any competition situation can create a sense that competition almost seems 'easy', but more importantly, you are testing yourself physically and mentally.

Lifestyle; life in sport is busy and intense, so being able to manage your personal life, making sure you surround yourself with people you want to be around and who provide the support you need can be key. This helps to create a 'balance' that is by no means an even split between sport and life, as sport generally tends to outweigh most other things, but having other things going on, be it studying of some kind, a flexible job or other hobbies can all play a part in being happy and healthy in high-performance sport.

Mental skill to help develop Lifestyle: Identify key people or activities that bring a holistic perspective to your life and make sure they are in place. Canadian Sport Centre Pacific programs like Career Track are also designed to help create a 'balance' with life.