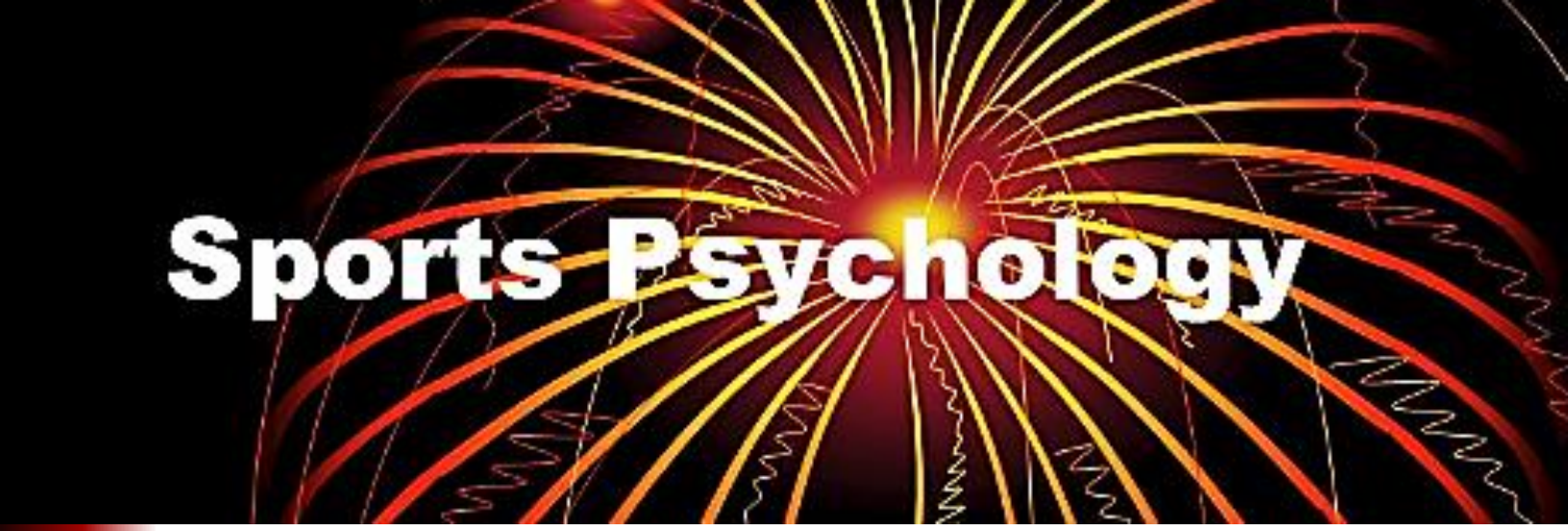


5 Important Mental Skills

Most sport psychologists work with athletes in an office setting (usually one hour per week,) providing them with mental tools that they can use during training and competition. This approach makes about as much sense as a coach offering racers technical instruction in an office and then telling them to go out on the hill and work on it in training. In either case, the transfer from inside to outside usually isn't very effective.

I feel that it would be much more productive to work with racers is on snow. Because of my ski racing background and knowledge of the sport, I prefer to go out on the hill with racers and show them how to incorporate mental skills, such as intensity, focus, imagery, and routines, while they're actually skiing – first, while free skiing, and then later in gates.

But, over the last few years, I have discovered an even better setting in which racers can begin to develop their mental skills: the gym or during workouts. Yes, using mental skills while doing strength or agility training (the two most common types of conditioning for alpine ski racers) is a great way to begin to ingrain those skills that will be of such benefit once you get on snow.

Think of it this way. Both a run of, say, slalom and a set of squats are physical performances that share many attributes. They both involve strength and technique. They hurt at the end. And, most importantly, they require certain mental skills to maximize the gains you make from them.

A great thing about beginning your mental training in the gym is that it is a much less complex environment than the mountain and, as a result, easier to practice and start to learn the necessary mental skills. You have fewer variables, fewer things to think about, and, importantly, fewer distractions that can prevent you from focusing on and practicing the mental skills.

Training runs and conditioning exercises also have similar phases of execution. There is the **preparation phase** where you get yourself physically and mentally ready to perform your best.

There is the **performance phase** where you are doing your best to perform at your highest level possible. There is the **conclusion phase** where you are in pain and where your body is telling your mind (often in a very loud voice) to either ease up or stop – because it hurts too much. Finally, there is the **completion phase** where you evaluate your performance and see what you can do to improve.

MENTALEDGE

This isn't just about sports. It's life.

Everything that you need to have and do for a great training or race run from a mental standpoint also applies to every set of a workout. You must be highly motivated to give your best effort even when you get tired, bored, or begin to really hurt. You have to have confidence that you can, for example, lift a certain weight or do a particular number of reps. You must have the intensity necessary to explode upward in jump squats. You have to focus on good technique so you execute properly and don't risk injury. You need an aggressive mindset to attack the exercise.

The foundation of this idea that mental training begins in the gym is that mental areas are muscles that only get stronger with repetition. Further, your ultimate goal in all of your training, whether physical, technical, tactical, or mental, is to deeply ingrain effective skills and habits that you can use on race day to ski your best.

Now that I've (hopefully) convinced you of the value of strengthening your mental muscles in the gym, you're probably wondering how exactly you can begin to include mental training into your workout regimen. Here are **five key mental skills** you can incorporate into your conditioning that can then transfer over to your on-snow training.

1. **Commitment**
   Before each exercise, make a conscious commitment to put your best effort into it from

start to finish. For you to get maximum gain from your training, you must want it badly. This commitment is particularly important at the end of a set when you need to finish strong in the face of the inevitable pain you feel.

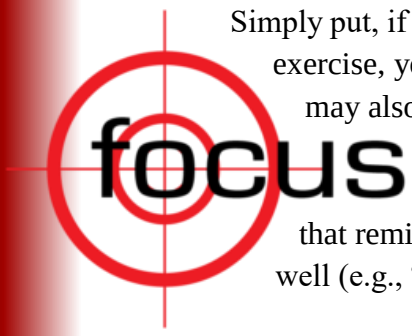
2. **Confidence**

Say something positive that will give you a confident state of mind (e.g., "10 reps at XX lbs., I can do this!") toward the exercise. This is especially important when doubts creep into your mind when you are, for example, doing a new exercise that you're not that skilled at or you're going to attempt a resistance you've never used before.

3. **Intensity**

Most ski racing-relevant exercises are about strength and agility, both of which require intensity to get the most out of them. Before every set, rev your engine by jumping up and down, take some aggressive breaths and use psych-up self-talk ("Let's do it!). When you are doing low-intensity exercises, such as stretching or yoga, relax your muscles, breathe deeply, and use psych-down self-talk (e.g., "Calm and easy…"). If your body is at its ideal intensity for the exercise, you'll do it well from start to finish and you'll gain the most benefit from it.

4. **Focus**



Simply put, if you're not totally focused on your best execution and effort in an exercise, you will not only not perform it well and gain its greater benefits, but you may also hurt yourself. Before every set, stop talking to people, take a deep breath to direct your focus onto the exercise, take 5-10 seconds and imagine yourself doing the exercise well, and, finally, grab a keyword that reminds you of an important thing you need to do to perform the exercise well (e.g., "hips" or "attack").

5. **Mindset**

You must keep an aggressive mindset from the first rep to the last.

Particularly in strength training, a passive mindset just isn't going to work. In a way, you're competing against the exercise; it wants to stop you from, for example, completing the required number of reps or continuing for the set time. You have to attack the exercise and impose your will on it. Otherwise, near the end of the set, your body will tell your mind to stop and your mind will listen. You must keep an aggressive mindset from the first rep to the last.

Because strengthening your mental muscles is relatively new and maybe not part of your regular conditioning routine, you'll probably forget to do it sometimes. Don't beat yourself up about it if you don't remember every time. At first, you'll need to be reminded to use the mental muscles every set. I would recommend taping a sheet of paper on the wall or mirror of your workout space saying something like, "**MENTAL MUSCLES!**" When you see it, you'll be reminded to do it. And before you know it, the mental muscles will become so strong that you use them automatically without needing reminders.

There are several great benefits to using mental skills in the gym. First, because you will be more mentally prepared for each set in your workout, you'll give more effort, have more quality in that effort, and, as a result, you'll make greater gains in your fitness. Second, you'll be able to strengthen your mental muscles before you get on snow, making that transition faster and smoother in incorporating them into your free skiing, gate training, and race preparations. Finally, once you've strengthened your mental muscles in your physical conditioning, on-snow training, and pre-race routine, they'll be so strong that when you get into the starting gate of a big race, you can flex those mental muscles to ski your very best.

Take this free assessment to identify the mental barriers holding you back from achieving your potential.

Before you can make improvements **you need to know how you are mentally holding yourself back** from performing your best. This is the first step to increasing your self-awareness and improving your mental game.

Check off all the statements below that apply to your mental game:

- ☐ You perform better in practice than competition
- ☐ You struggle to bounce back from mistakes and refocus
- ☐ You lack confidence and have self-doubt about your skills
- ☐ You choke under pressure
- ☐ You have trouble staying focused on the correct things and can't ignore distractions
- ☐ You need to control your anxiety/nerves/stress
- ☐ You need to control your frustration
- ☐ You need to control your sadness
- ☐ You do not have clear goals. You lack direction
- ☐ You can't stay motivated. It is hard to always give 100% effort. You need help managing your energy and improving your practice performance
- ☐ You worry about failing or making mistakes
- ☐ You are not sure how to get in the zone consistently. You need help with mental preparation
- ☐ You need to remove mental blocks
- ☐ You need help managing your perfectionism and expectations. Expecting to be perfect or make no mistakes gets in the way of your performance.
- ☐ You want to improve your overall mental toughness
- ☐ You need to improve your self-talk. Including managing negative thinking, using helpful/positive thinking and decreasing self-criticism
- ☐ You want help coping with injury/pain
- ☐ You are dealing with personal issues that are interfering with your sport
- ☐ You are in a performance slump or feel burnt out
- ☐ You overthink before you compete
- ☐ You worry about what others think when you are competing
- ☐ You have coaches or parents who are difficult to deal with. They are affecting your performance or training
- ☐ You are going through a tough transition such as high school to college or into retirement
- ☐ You would like to improve you awareness of the mental barriers that are stopping you from performing your best

If you have checked 2 or more boxes above you can definitely improve your performance with mental training.

If you want to **go one step further** look at all the statements you have checked. For each mental barrier rate, out of 5, how much it hurts your performance or affects your training. For example if you struggle to bounce back from mistakes you would rate this 5 if you often perform worse afterwards. Once you have done this for each, identify the five mental barriers rated the highest. These are the areas you need to start working on first.

Gold medals aren't really made of gold. They are made of sweat, determination and a hard-to-find alloy called guts.