

An Introduction to Mental Training

Presentation made to the Lakeside Boys and Girls Golf Teams

September 23th, 2024

Session 2 Summary & Reflections

“By understanding how a few became great, anyone can improve.”

LEARNING FROM THE SUCCESSES OF OTHERS

In our first meeting, we focused on *peak performance* and what we experience when at our best. In our second session, we shifted gears and concentrated on *peak performers* and what successful people are like mentally. While elite competitors often have unique physical gifts, several decades of investigation have revealed that these individuals are also distinct psychologically, and examining these mental differences is something that can help everyone learn and grow more effectively. By closely examining and demystifying what successful individuals do, we can borrow from them, develop similar habits, and ultimately, more readily develop our own physical and mental skills. The Wheel of Excellence model that I briefly outlined in our conversation comes from Canadian sport psychologist Terry Orlick. After in-depth interviews and conversations with numerous high-level performers, Orlick concluded that there are at least seven different qualities that distinguish these rare individuals. Let's review each of these characteristics and see what can be learned from them.

THE WHEEL OF EXCELLENCE

1. Focus

Alone at the center of Orlick's modern Wheel of Excellence is focus (note that this is different from the older Zone of Excellence link on the team webpage). Athletes who consistently succeed and perform well under pressure have cultivated the skill of attending to what's relevant and ignoring or sometimes actively blocking out what doesn't matter. Though most readily acknowledge that proper concentration is essential for performing our best, many are unsure exactly how to go about developing this important ability. “Come on, FOCUS DAMN IT!” is usually what we tell ourselves when we sense our attention is off. Unfortunately, this common strategy doesn't work well and frequently only makes matters worse. If focus is a skill that you would like to hone, there are a few suggestions below that are likely more effective.

Learn to meditate

Headspace, Calm, & Healthy Minds meditation app links are now on the team page.

Address other parts of the wheel

Changing your use of positive images, commitment, or beliefs can all constructively alter focus.

Rather than “trying to focus,” **ask yourself the following questions:**

- Where is a more useful place to put my attention? (my routine, my target, my tempo, my balance, my senses, my level of tension, what I am grateful for, singing a song in my head, noticing beautiful nature, chatting with my playing partners)
- What intentions could I pay attention to that help put me in my best state?
- How do I want to be in this moment? What matters to me? What are my values and core principles?
- What’s a simple reminder or phrase that I could tell myself? (I’ve got this. Either way, I’ll be OK. Be present. I love this. What is something I’m grateful for?)
- What’s a useful memory from my past that I could recall?
- Apply the acronym WIN and ask yourself: **What’s Important Now?**

2. Commitment

Successful performers often have a deep passion or love for what they are doing. Some people who study this domain will say, “Commitment fuels the success machine.” This phrase is trite but true. Be intentional and specific about what you are committing to. Listed below are some commitment targets that could be worth incorporating into your own mental game.

Commit to a Goal

Be mindful here as certain goals (specifically outcomes goals) can have drawbacks, particularly if they are the only type of goal that you have. You can end up committing to something that you can’t control.

Commit to a Goal of Excellence

This idea comes from the great college basketball coach, John Wooden. Wooden was one of the most successful coaches of all time; during his time at UCLA, he won 10 NCAA national championships, including SEVEN IN ROW! Despite his objective success, Wooden reportedly never talked much about winning with his players. Instead, he encouraged them with his own unique definition of success: *Success is peace of mind which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to become the best of which you are capable.* Pacific Lutheran University football coach Frosty Westering offered complementary advice to his players when he encouraged them to *commit to consistently giving their best shot, especially when they’re not having a good day.*

And perhaps most important of all...

Commit to Daily Action

The most powerful concepts and ideas are often useless until they are effectively applied and put into consistent practice.

3. Confidence & Belief

The confidence we have in ourselves and our skills is a critical performance variable. A famous quote attributed to Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company, echoes this sentiment: *Whether you believe you can do something - or you believe you can't - you're probably right.* Terry Orlick made a similar point when he said, *"If you believe your obstacles are insurmountable, you're right, even though you're wrong."* Beliefs often act like unquestioned commands that tell us what is and isn't possible. Can you see how this connects with one of the suggestions from our first session, where I encouraged you to ask yourself: Is it possible the next shot could be a good one? Your ability to apply this mental tool is at least somewhat dependent on the amount and type of confidence you have. Beliefs and other related thoughts often have a disproportionate impact on our motivation, our feelings, and, ultimately, our behavior. There is an approach within the discipline of psychology known as the cognitive perspective that is devoted to exploring and productively utilizing the associations between our beliefs and behaviors. Hopefully, at this point, it isn't a surprise to learn that much of modern sport psychology draws heavily from this perspective.

I'm guessing that you have at least some familiarity with a phenomenon that demonstrates the power of beliefs: the placebo effect. Placebo effects occur when a person's behavior or symptoms change because of expectations. Here's an example. Researchers investigating pain medications conducted a study of over 100 patients suffering from post-operative cancer pain. Half of these individuals received morphine, a potent pain medication, and not surprisingly, about two thirds of them reported significant reductions in pain. The other half received a sugar pill but were told that it was a pain medication. Remarkably, almost half of these individuals reported similar pain relief. Many assume that placebo effects are "just mental," but recent studies suggest that expectations can impact levels of brain chemicals like dopamine and endorphins. Remember, there is nothing in a placebo medication or therapy that should biologically produce such changes. Thus, these physiological shifts are being driven by the mind.

Other investigators have found evidence that placebos can even counteract the effect of certain medications. In another study, pregnant women experiencing significant nausea were offered a new "wonder drug" to reduce their symptoms, and most of the women who took it showed significant improvement. But in this study, there was a catch. The medication the women received wasn't an anti-nausea drug or a placebo. It was syrup of ipecac. What does this do? It *induces vomiting!* Never underestimate the power of belief. Listed below are some particular beliefs to reflect on and consider revising if necessary.

Belief in the Significance of Your Goals

Is what you are committed to worthwhile? Are you passionate about it? Does it excite you? If not, it will be difficult to persist long enough to develop your skills and improve. It also

helps considerably if your goal is about more than just you and your individual accomplishments.

Belief in Your Abilities

How is your belief in your capacity to do what is necessary to reach your goal? In psychological circles, this is referred to as **self-efficacy**, and it's a valuable concept when attempting to predict such behaviors as whether heart surgery patients will stick with their recommended rehabilitation plans or how well golfers play in college tournaments. A famous example from the world of running helps to illustrate one of the factors that can significantly impact self-efficacy judgments: the performances of others, particularly those who seem similar to us.

Before 1954, it was commonly assumed that it was physically impossible for a human being to run a mile in less than 4 minutes. Running experts, coaches, and even physicians all had convincing reasons for why eclipsing this limit would never happen. And then, on a cool day in May of 1954, British runner Roger Bannister became the first person to break through. Interestingly, prior to this remarkable accomplishment, he regularly imagined himself doing it (see Positive Images below) and convinced himself that it could be done (does it sound like he had strong self-efficacy?). What makes this feat even more provocative is what happened after it. Just a month and a half later, John Landry of Australia also shattered the four-minute barrier. Within the next decade, 336 people beat this time. By 2018, the number was 1,479, and as of 2022, 1,755 people had posted times less than four minutes. Connecting this to self-efficacy, what do you think happened to the beliefs of other runners when they saw Bannister's time?

Belief about Your Abilities

When compared to the previous section title (Belief in Your Ability), this one likely appears redundant. However, the subtle language change is intentional, and it was made to set the stage for a short conversation about a different type of belief: mindset. This concept owes its roots to the ground-breaking work of psychologist Carol Dweck, who has identified a continuum regarding how people think about the nature of ability. On one end of the spectrum is the fixed mindset. This belief assumes that when it comes to talent, what you have is what you're born with, and you can't change it. When people see an amazing performance and comment on how "naturally gifted" the performer must be, this is an example of the fixed mindset. So too, is the statement, after a failed algebra test, that "I suck at math." Both assume that performance outcomes are the result of some intrinsic, static aspect of the person.

The opposite of a fixed mindset is a growth mindset. Individuals who lean towards this way of thinking about skill pay less attention to what we supposedly have or don't have and instead focus more on using quality effort to grow or develop their talents. Studies have found that people with this mindset are more likely to be inspired and motivated by the successes of others, persist in the face of difficulties and setbacks, embrace challenges, learn from constructive criticism, and ultimately perform at higher levels.

Not only is there an important association between mindset and performance, but it also appears to be the case that if someone's mindset is changed, this can cause a subsequent change in their performance. In one study, researchers held sessions with students who were about to take on challenging math classes in middle school. Half of the students received information about useful study strategies, while the remaining participants received information designed to change their mindset. Specifically, the presenters summarized modern neuroplasticity research indicating that, in essence, **the brain is like a muscle**: it changes and strengthens when you train it the right way. The study organizers then tracked and monitored the progress of these students as they navigated their middle school mathematics classes. When the results were collected, an interesting pattern emerged. The grades of the students who received the study strategies showed a slow and steady decline across the two years of the study. The grades of those in the growth mindset group initially showed this same dip but then rebounded after they received the growth mindset intervention.

Mindset is one of my favorite variables in all of psychology, in part because when I first encountered discussions of it, I could readily see the fixed mindset I had when I was younger and how it held me back. Let's contrast how people with each of these mindsets think about effort. For someone with a fixed mindset, effort is viewed negatively. Effort is something they hope they never have to show. Why? Because if you're working hard, they assume, this must mean that you don't have enough "natural" talent within you to be successful. Years ago, I was working with an elite Lakeside tennis player who was highly ranked in the Pacific Northwest. He confessed during one of our sessions how he felt like a fraud because he seemingly had to work so hard to keep up with his other more naturally gifted competitors. Needless to say, we had a long conversation about mindset after he revealed this.

How else could effort be interpreted? What if effort was your best friend when it comes to learning and growth? What if effort was the key to developing your skills and growing your potential? What if exerting quality effort consistently was one of the things you took personal pride in and enjoyed doing? These are all part of the growth mindset, and if you want to, you too can intentionally cultivate them. One way to do this is to apply the **deliberate practice** framework, which will be discussed later in this summary.

4. Positive Images

Research has shown that mental imagery is one of the more powerful performance enhancement tools, and successful performers often have highly developed visualization skills. Mental rehearsal is a consistent, daily part of their training systems, just like exercise, nutrition, and sleep. How exactly do elite performers use imagery? See below for a few ideas.

Imagine Goals & Outcomes

Visualization is a wonderful supplement to goal setting (another impactful mental skill). To gain mastery in any domain requires significant effort and persistence, and we don't always

feel motivated to consistently show up. Thoughtful use of imagery can help reignite the spark and keep us on track for long-term improvement.

Imagine Actions & Processes

Flashy results often catch all the attention. Everyone wants to win events, matches, competitions, and championships. Unfortunately, these outcome goals have a major limitation: they aren't controllable. You can perform the best you ever have and still not win; your opponent could be better that day. Similarly, you can win events and not play that well. Are such results fully satisfying? Usually not. Are you getting better and making necessary improvements? Perhaps no. This is where a focus on process comes in handy. Can you see yourself successfully executing the behaviors that will make great outcomes possible? Can you see yourself making a swing change that you've been working on? Can you see yourself bouncing back after a bad shot, hole, or round? In many ways, time spent imagining your key behaviors and actions is more important than visualizing your desired performance results.

Imagine to Regulate your State

In our first session, we focused on your state and the value of learning how to regulate it. Visualization offers numerous ways to do this. Feeling stressed and anxious? Imagine that you're somewhere more relaxing. This likely sounds too simple to be effective, but this is a tactic used by numerous elite performers. An interview with basketball great Michael Jordan comes to mind. Supposedly, whenever he would attempt big free throws near the end of a close game, he would pretend he was alone, back in the gym, shooting by himself. Feeling flat and unmotivated? Use imagery to pull your energy back up. This is one place where thinking about exciting outcomes can be advantageous. There is no shortage of ways that mental rehearsal can be used to regulate your mental, physical, and emotional states. The only limit here is your creativity.

5. Ongoing Learning

When discussing the value of commitment earlier, we could have also talked about the importance of committing to ongoing learning. Many successful individuals have a lifelong dedication to learning about the area in which they excel. As I write this, I'm reading the autobiography of the Olympic swimmer Katie Ledecky, and this attribute certainly applies to her athletic career. The self-described "swim nerd" is always exploring new ways of getting better. Another way of describing these individuals is to say that they take a mastery orientation toward their craft, and research has shown there are numerous advantages to taking such an approach to performance. The opposite of a mastery approach is an ego orientation, where the individual tends to pay more attention to outcomes and results. Success for ego-oriented athletes depends primarily on how they do relative to others. Given the uncontrollability of such comparisons, the confidence of such people is likely to be less robust.

Practice Deliberately

To enhance your approach to ongoing learning, pay attention to cultivating skills such as learning to more accurately self-evaluate, learning from the successes of others, and learning how to more constructively deal with the challenges and difficulties that line every path to mastery. A concept related to ongoing learning that I emphasized in our most recent conversation was **deliberate practice**. First proposed by psychologist K. Anders Ericsson, this construct suggests that expertise is less about innate talents and more about the ways we prepare for moments that matter. As you hopefully recall, Ericsson's optimal training environment contains four essential elements. Deliberate practice:

- has specific *goals*
- provides clear *feedback* on goal progress (ideally from an expert)
- is fully *focused*
- requires *getting out of one's comfort zone*

If people train long enough in settings with these four deliberate practice pillars, they improve, and, if they persist, expertise is often gained. To bring this concept to life and to motivate yourself to apply it, remember the examples of college student Steve Faloan, who learned to recall over 80 random digits read to him once, and journalist Josh Foer, who, after covering the US Memory Championships, spent a year training like a “mental athlete,” and then won the competition himself.

6. Distraction Control

We began this summary with a discussion of the importance of proper focus. As most of you already appreciate, strong attentional skills are a vital element of successful performance. You probably also realize that there is no shortage of factors that can throw our concentration off. Some of the more obvious disruptors are external and take the form of an annoying playing partner, difficult weather conditions, an unlucky bounce, or a coaching decision that you disagree with. Some of the most potentially harmful distractions are internal, such as your excessive self-criticism for a poor shot, your fear of missing a short putt, or your overall doubt of your skills and abilities. With awareness and patience, you gain better insights into where this interference comes from and develop strategies for coping more effectively. A great way to get better is to apply the strategies mentioned above in progressively more challenging practice settings. This is one of the reasons that performance practice, where competitive pressure is simulated and evoked, is advocated so strongly by your coaches.

7. Mental Readiness

This last component of Orlick's Wheel brings us full circle to where we began in our first session: the optimal performance state. Orlick has observed that one of the things that separates the great from the less accomplished is how readily the former can access this potent experience. Performance coach Jim Murphy repeatedly stresses that if you want more *extraordinary performances*, improve your skill at creating *extraordinary experiences*. If you know you are alert, relaxed, and energized when at your best, get better at intentionally calling these sensations up, regardless of your immediate circumstances.

If you've come this far, **thank you for giving this document your time.** I know that you have numerous other obligations, and I hope you found these summary comments and reflections on our second session to be helpful. If you have any questions or reactions you'd like to share, don't hesitate to reach out. Thanks, and best of luck with the rest of the season. Go Lions!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Don". The letter "D" is large and stylized, with a loop at the top. The letters "on" are smaller and written in a cursive style.