

The will to win is important,  
but the will to prepare is vital.

**Joe Paterno**  
Hall of Fame college football coach

## 1.5 Getting a Mental Edge: Preparing to Compete

When I speak to high school athletes around the country, I often ask if they have a mental game. Some hands go up, but the looks on many faces tell me that they are not sure what that means.

Athletes without mental games do well if things go well. If not, they can't adjust to adversity and fail to perform to their ability. But some athletes develop a mental game they can rely on when things go bad so they are not at the mercy of events. They can give their best effort even when everything seems to be going wrong.

Think about the statement at the top of this chapter. Everyone wants to win, but just wanting to win doesn't do it. Preparation is the key. Most high school athletes prepare physically, but few prepare as hard mentally.

This chapter will help you prepare for competition in ways you may have never considered. Sport psychology teaches that mental preparation is as important as physical training and game-time execution. Here are tools to help you develop your mental game.

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### ■ Becoming an Intentional Visualizer

Visualization has become a staple of great performers in all realms, but especially sports. It may seem mysterious, but we do it all the time. Visualization is so much a part of our lives that we often don't even recognize it as such.

For example, if someone asks you how to get to your school, you mentally rehearse how you would make the trip yourself. "Go down two blocks and make a left at Colfax Road. Then you go three blocks..." That is visualization.

The key is to become an *intentional* visualizer and use visualization to improve your performance. I recommend you add two kinds of visualization to your mental game tool kit: "mental rehearsal" and "catastrophization."

### ■ Mental Rehearsal

Here's Hall-of-Fame pitcher Nolan Ryan (quoted in *Mind Gym* by Gary Mack):

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"The night before a game I lie down, close my eyes, relax my body, and prepare myself for the game. I go through the entire lineup of the other team, one batter at a time. I visualize exactly how I am going to pitch to each hitter and I see and feel myself throwing exactly the pitches that I want to throw. Before I ever begin to warm up at the ballpark, I've faced all of the opposition's hitters four times and I've gotten my body ready for exactly what it is I want to do."

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One kind of visualization is simply rehearsing what "I want to do." Notice that Ryan saw and felt himself doing what he wanted to do. The more senses you bring into play when you visualize, the better.

Begin by visualizing yourself successfully completing a skill such as making a catch, a putt, or a serve. Find a quiet place to sit and picture yourself completing the skill with perfect form. It's crucial that you see yourself doing it exactly right because practice doesn't make perfect, but perfect practice does.

Visualize yourself in the zone – making the big plays, making your teammates better, handling whatever happens with calmness and class. Start small. Nolan

Ryan probably didn't start out by visualizing an entire game. Start with the beginning of the competition and see yourself doing what you want to do. Then pick out some challenging situations and see yourself successfully doing what you want.

In addition to the testimony of elite athletes like Ryan who say visualizing made them better, research shows that visualizing can improve a skill. One study showed that players who practiced shooting for 30 minutes and visualizing free throws for 30 minutes each day improved significantly more than players who practiced their shot for 60 minutes each day. Visualization with practice improved performance more than the same amount of time of practice alone. So give it a try.

### ■ Catastrophization

When Nancy Ditz set her sights on winning the Los Angeles Marathon in 1987, the heat concerned her. She feared not having a water bottle available when she needed it late in the race. She visualized remaining calm, not wasting energy on things she couldn't control. At one point during the race, her water bottle wasn't where it should have been, but she remained calm, just as she had visualized. She went on to win the L.A. Marathon because she had prepared for the worst with a tool I call "catastrophization."

A catastrophe is something that goes terribly wrong. With catastrophization, you visualize things happening exactly as you hope they will *not* happen. And then – *and this is crucial* – you visualize yourself continuing on with your best effort and prevailing.

You imagine everything going wrong at the beginning of a competition. You double fault your serves. You score an own-goal. You dribble the ball off your foot and miss an easy lay-up. You walk the bases loaded in the first inning.

You see yourself remain calm, confident you can do the only thing you have to do right now – make the next play. See yourself serve an ace, assist a teammate who heads the ball into the goal, hustle back to prevent an easy basket, get the next hitter to ground the ball back to you for a 1-2-3 double-play, after which you get the third out on a pop-up.

It is comforting to feel in your bones that you can prevail in a worst-case situation. Catastrophization helps you develop your mental game so you never let the emotional discomfort of being in a tough spot keep you from persevering.

### ■ Internal and External Cameras

You can visualize as you see out your own eyes with what I call the "internal camera," which is good for rehearsing a skill. Feel yourself serving, see your serve hit just as it does when you actually hit the ball.

Also visualize with the "external camera," as if you were watching yourself on videotape to show what you look like when you are doing it right. Experiment with both cameras because both will help you develop your "visualization muscle." The external camera helps you develop a mental blueprint of the proper motion you want to do, while the internal camera gives a taste of what your actual experience in the moment will be.

### ■ Preparing for "Off Days"

Most athletes have a Plan A, the way they like to compete that plays to their strengths. Former Boston Celtics great Larry Bird was a fantastic outside shooter and liked to shoot the three-pointer to set up his drives to the basket. But some days his outside shot wasn't dropping. Rather than get discouraged, Bird kept himself in the game with Plan B – work to get inside position for offensive rebounds. His Plan C was to move to open spaces to free up his teammates, set picks, and do whatever else was needed to help his team.

Bird's advance planning got him into the Basketball Hall of Fame. Here's a plan that Jessy Marshall, a member of PCA's National Student-Athlete Advisory Board, developed before several summer basketball tournaments.

- Plan A: Drive to the bucket and either make the basket or get fouled.
- Plan B: Look for the pull-up shot off a screen or off the catch.
- Plan C: Drive and kick to a teammate that is open.

Jessy: "I know I'll execute each of the plans at one time or another in the game. I mentally go over all three plans repeatedly, so I can take what the defense gives me and make it work to my advantage."

You'll improve your performance on off days if you have back-up plans. Knowing ahead of time what you will do if Plan A isn't working can help you quickly transition to Plan B. A great Plan B is to focus on effort. If your offense isn't clicking, focus on working harder on defense. In many sports offensive attacks are started by tough defense.

Whatever your sport, you can hone your mental game by identifying your Plan A and preparing plans for what to do when it isn't working.



## SECTION ONE

## MAKING THE GAME BETTER



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