

Where does the power come from to see the race through to its end?

From within.

Eric Liddell
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1.6 Getting a Mental Edge: During the Game

By the end of the third quarter in Game 3 of the 2010 NBA Finals, the Los Angeles Lakers' 17-point lead had shrunk to six, and the Boston Celtics had momentum going into the fourth quarter. Realizing his Lakers' teammates were demoralized, Derek Fisher asked if someone had told them before the game that they would start the fourth quarter ahead by six, would they have been happy about it? They all agreed they would have loved going into the last quarter with a six-point lead, which is, after all, where they were. Fisher's "reframing" question elevated their spirits, and the Lakers went on to win by seven points.

Mental preparation is crucial to high performance. But preparation gets you only so far because even the best plan can't anticipate everything that will happen in a competition. Sometimes you have to rise to the occasion in the moment. Here are some tools to help you deal with the various pressures that inevitably arise in the heat of competition.

■ Reframing to Increase Resilience

Once in the middle of a hard 10-mile run, I encountered a long muddy patch, and my shoes became caked with mud. My frustration grew with every step as I realized how tired I was and how far I still had to run.

But I thought of the special plyometric shoes my son, Gabriel, wore to improve his foot speed and vertical leap. What was so different about my running with a few extra pounds of mud on my soles? Thinking of my muddy shoes as intensifying my workout transformed my negative emotions, and I was able to enjoy the extra effort needed to finish my run.

Like Derek Fisher, I "reframed" my situation, something that photographers and filmmakers do to get a story right and get the right story. A certain take on a scene may not be right, so the filmmaker looks at the situation from different angles until she finds the one that tells the story she wants to tell.

Reframing is a three-step process:

- 1) Something disrupts your plans.
- 2) You experience negative emotions, like disappointment, discouragement, or sadness.
- 3) Rather than allowing that initial reaction to stick, you reframe and ask how you can make something good come from it.

You don't deny that it happened. You don't pretend it's not as bad as it is. You confront the reality and reframe the event so that it tells a story that will help you transform your negative emotions into positive ones.

Chris McLachlin, the legendary basketball and volleyball coach at Honolulu's Punahou School, tells of a coach of a volleyball team with a record good enough to be the top seed in a big tournament. But instead of a first game at home against the weakest opponent, they ended up traveling to play a strong team. He was upset, but his players, who had learned to reframe, took the better mental approach.

"Coach, traveling isn't so bad. We can play music on the bus. We can do our homework. It will be fun." Another player: "We want to win this tournament, so isn't it better if we play a tougher team in the first round so we'll be sharper in the later rounds when we play the top teams?" With these players' ability to reframe, it's not surprising that they did go on to win the tournament.

Used regularly, reframing can become a habit – a powerful tool to increase resilience. Knowing you can reframe and rebound from setbacks increases your poise. And resilience and poise contribute to success.

■ Control Your Emotions with a Self-Control Routine

Players who let their emotions control them can't play their best. That doesn't mean you have to be an emotionless robot. Competition brings out some of our strongest emotions: fear, anger, frustration, elation. That's natural. A key to elevating your game is developing an ability to channel those emotions productively. You need to control your emotions rather than allowing them to control you.

How do you handle your emotions when you are getting beat by a lesser opponent, being yelled at by your coach, feeling the sting of a cheap shot, or dealing with a bad call? That's key. Because if you retaliate, lose focus on the next play, sulk, or lash out at teammates or officials, you'll hurt your performance and that of others around you.

So, what can you do? Develop a self-control routine. It might involve deep breaths, self-talk ("Let it go!"), or tapping your helmet. You might walk to a different location and separate yourself from the action momentarily. A tennis player may go to the back fence and refocus. A pitcher might leave the mound momentarily. In sports where breaks don't happen, you'll need to refocus more quickly and do it in your mind only. That's okay. You be in charge. Don't let negative and destructive emotions run the show.

■ Transformational Self-Talk

Self-talk is a big idea in sport psychology because "we are what we eat" mentally as well as physically. If you feed yourself a lot of negative statements about yourself, it harms both your sense of possibility and your performance.

Everyone engages in self-talk. And even though most of the time most people aren't aware of it, it has a big impact on us. Most of the self-talk people engage in is negative. "I better

not strike out." "This just isn't my day." "What will my friends say if I lose?" So often we focus on the negative. And when we make a mistake, we tend to come down hard on ourselves and make blistering statements about how bad we are.

Imagine trying to play your best if your mind is filled with negative garbage. A player on the receiving end of negative self-talk is not a pretty sight. So Triple-Impact Competitors work hard to transform their negative self-talk.

Here's a three-step process called "Transformational Self-Talk" to counteract negative self-talk and get back on the right track.

- 1) **Make your self-talk a true statement by expressing it as a *feeling*.** When I screw up, I often say to myself, "You are an idiot!" Am I an idiot? Maybe, maybe not. But what is absolutely true is that I **feel** like an idiot. To make my self-talk absolutely true, I change it to, "**I feel like an idiot.**"
- 2) **Use the Power of a Big BUT.** The word "but" is powerful. When we use it, we degrade or devalue whatever comes before. We all know when someone says "but" it means something negative is coming to devalue what was just said. So add "but" to your feeling statement to degrade it. **I feel like an idiot, but...**
- 3) **End with "I'm-the-kind-of-person-who."** Think about the kind of competitor you want to be, and tell yourself what will help you in this moment. Remember, you are what you eat, so end your statement with something that reinforces your ability to keep going. "**I feel like an idiot, BUT I'm the kind of person who refuses to give up!**"

You have now transformed your negative self-talk into something that can keep you going in the face of adversity.

■ Prevent Choking with the 3 B's

Athletes at all levels worry that they will "choke" in the clutch. Let me be clear about what choking is and isn't. Choking is *not* failing to make a play. Choking is *not* getting beat on a great play by your opponent. Those things happen all the time and, while unfortunate, they are not the result of choking.

Choking is failing to perform an action in a high-pressure game situation that we can routinely perform in practice or games when the stakes are low. If I routinely make 9 of 10 free throws in practice, but miss several in a row at the end of a close play-off game, it may well be that I am choking.

Few athletes want to talk about choking. There is an unspoken belief that if you talk about choking, you may then be more likely to choke. But facing that fear allows you to develop an antidote to choking, like the 3 B's: Breathe, Bounce, & Break.

- **Breathe:** When we are afraid of choking, we literally don't get enough air into our system. Without proper breathing, we are unlikely to make the play. So the first B is Breathe. Take a couple of deep breaths, and feel the oxygen getting into your system.
- **Bounce:** We also tend to lose feeling of the ground in our feet when we get really nervous. So Bounce up and down a few times like a boxer warming up for a match, and get re-rooted to the earth.
- **Break:** As a high school football player, I was always nervous until I made contact with an opponent. Once I hit someone or someone hit me, the nervousness disappeared. So, the third B is Break. Clap your hands together briskly to simulate contact with the opposition.

The 3 B's make it much more likely you will be able to execute the play the way you are able to in practice.

Hone Your Mental Edge

You now have a set of tools that sports psychologists routinely use with elite athletes. Use Exercise 5 on the following page to create a plan to improve your mental game. While these tools don't guarantee success, they give you a greater chance to do your best – and a distinct mental edge over most other high school athletes.

Exercise 5: Honing Your Mental Game

Place check marks next to the mental game tools from Chapters 1.5 and 1.6 that you want to use right away. Then make a plan to use them.

Preparing to Compete

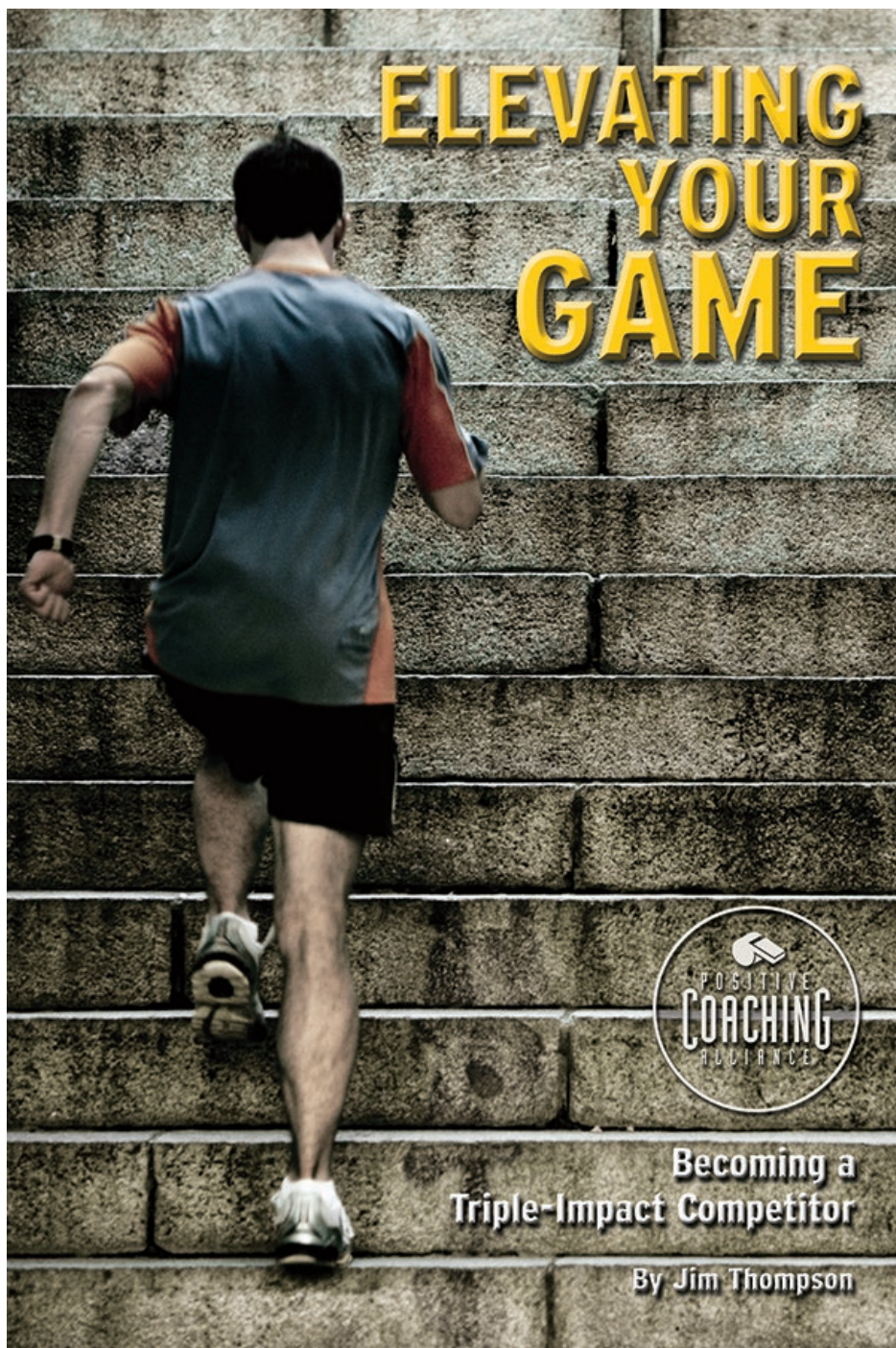
- ___ **Visualization: Rehearsal:** Visualize yourself in the "zone," performing at your best, doing things all the right ways.
- ___ **Visualization: Catastrophization:** Visualize "worst-case scenarios," and then visualize yourself continuing to work hard and prevailing.
- ___ **Preparing for "Off Days:"** Have alternative plans when your "A-game" does not come easily to you.

During the Game

- ___ **Reframing:** Re-cast what seem like problematic situations into favorable opportunities.
- ___ **Self-Control Routine:** Develop routines to make sure you don't let your emotions derail you.
- ___ **Transformational Self-Talk:** Transform negative self-talk to make it positive.
- ___ **Prevent Choking with the 3 B's:** Overcome the fear and nervousness that can accompany pressure situations using Breathe, Bounce, and Break.

Mental Game Action Plan

How will you begin to integrate these tools into your mental game?



**BETTER ATHLETES
BETTER PEOPLE**

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