



## **A Model of Offensive and Defensive Mental Skills**

All great coaches and athletes know that mental skills are critical to sport success, but how exactly? Sport psychology as a profession has not done a great job of explaining why athletes need to develop mental skills. The way sport is to organize skills into a teaching plan rather than show how and why these skills impact athletes in the real world of sport.

Without a clear answer to the why and how, we still have many athletes resisting coaches' efforts to introduce mental skills training. Have you ever heard a football lineman say that you don't need to be physically strong in football? Of course not, the reason is obvious. An opponent will push a weak football lineman all over the field. The lineman may deny it, but coaches can show him a game video and prove it beyond dispute. The benefits of physical strength in sport are visible. One of the problems with sport psychology is that it is invisible. Coaches and athletes need a model of sport psychology that explains why athletes need mental skills and how they work in various sport situations.

Recently, I started using a model of sport psychology mental skills that organizes my thinking about sport psychology. In addition, this model helps coaches and athletes understand what happens during competition when athletes are strong in some mental skills and weak in others. The model aids in making invisible mental skills become

more visible. It starts by organizing all mental skills into two major categories: offensive skills and defence skills.

## **OFFENSIVE MENTAL SKILLS**

Offensive skills let an athlete dominate a competition. Offensive physical skills might include the terrific top-end speed of 400-meter runner Michael Johnson or the high V02 Max of Lance Armstrong that allows him to pass other cyclists in the Alps. Unusual strength and quickness are offensive physical skills in a majority of Olympic sports. When these offensive skills are well developed in an athlete, other athletes know that athlete is a contender. Offensive skills are absolutely necessary to be a truly exceptional athlete.

Offensive mental skills allow an athlete to dominate an event. Tremendous **competitive desire** causes athletes to put in time learning new skills to take their game or sport to a higher level (think Tiger Woods). Athletes' competitive desire helps them rise to match and surpass great efforts by competitors.

A **drive to set and achieve goals** keeps athletes striving for improvement, identifying and eliminating weaknesses and keeping training intense and focussed.

The **ability to visualize success** lets athletes practice for excellence and keep thoughts simple and practical. For athletes under pressure, **self-talk skills** help them think in a positive and useful way.

The **ability to develop effective competition plans** is a critical mental skill for athletes who compete in complex, dynamic sports with frequent decision making. A willingness and ability to **commit** to a plan of training and competition is an offensive skill that allows athletes to give 100 percent in competition and get the most out of new

and innovative training methods.

**Comfort with risk** is an essential offensive skill for competitive situations where too much caution can be the difference between a medal and tenth place. The **ability to maintain a relaxed “athletic” approach** is a related skill that allows athletes to act without hesitation and avoid the danger of cautious over-thinking.

Finally, **confidence in skills and the competition plan** allows athletes to stay on the offensive in important competitions.

The word that may best describe athletes with extremely strong offensive mental skills is predator. These athletes are focussed, intense, athletic, looking to win and ready to take advantage of the opportunity for success that competition provides. Without these offensive mental skills, athletes may be good, but they will never be great.

## **DEFENSIVE MENTAL SKILLS**

Defensive skills help athletes succeed consistently and in all conditions. Defensive physical skills might include Nordic skier Bjorn Dahlie’s ability to handle tremendous training loads, Speed skater Eric Heiden’s ability to quickly recover from the effort of the last race, Olympic Champion Haile Gebrselasie’s capacity to adapt and respond to surges in the race by other runners, and Edwin Moses’ tremendous technique that stood up to the test of a decade-long winning streak. When athletes’ defensive skills are strong they are consistent performers, winning big events as well as small. They are resilient and easily adapt to changes in their environment.

If offensive mental skills are necessary for excellence, athletes need defensive skills to maintain excellence, handle adversity and allow them to be at their best at the

big events like the Olympic Games. Defensive mental skills also help athletes be resilient and consistent in any conditions. Athletes' **desire for excellence in training** results in practicing the way they should compete in an organized, efficient and useful manner.

**Controlling competitive anxiety** becomes more important as the significance of the competition increases. The ability to **control anger and frustration** before and during competitions allows athletes to quickly gain balance and recover from errors in the environment.

**Control of energy levels** falls into three different defensive mental skills: 1) ability to raise intensity level, 2) ability to recover emotional energy between efforts, and 3) ability to adjust energy up or down depending on the competitive situation.

The skill of quickly **recovering from performance setbacks** is a defensive mental skill that pays dividends in lengthy competitions or competitions with repeated efforts. **Flexible response** to changes in the environment may be most important at big events (Olympic Games, World Championships, etc.) where environment changes the most.

The **ability to focus, despite distractions** is also critical at events where distractions increase in proportion to the size and importance of the event.

Finally, **mental maintenance skills** or the ability to maintain simple, effective thoughts under pressure is often the difference between having a great plan and executing it.

The key words that describe defensive mental skills include: **balance**, **resilience**, and, **invulnerability**. Athletes with strong defensive mental skills are

individuals coaches count on for consistent performance at competition, after competition, big event or small.

What does the Offense-Defence Model add to the usual list of mental skills needed for sport? An important item is the way to explain the behaviour coaches see in athletes. Here are a few brief examples:

1) An athlete with a strong desire to dominate expects and plans to win and is dominant at the national level, but he/she always makes big errors in international competition.

This athlete may have excellent offensive mental skills, but his/her defensive mental skills probably need some work. He/she may lack control of competitive anxiety, in part because of the overwhelming desire to win or because the energy level gets so high at big events that thinking suffers, and he/she makes basic errors. This athlete may be resistant to working with a sport psychologist because the strong offensive mind perceives discussing anxiety as a weakness. He/she needs to understand that anxiety is normal, and unwillingness to deal with it is a weakness.

2) An athlete gets in a rut. His/her times or scores have not improved, and he/she always loses to the same competitors. This athlete is never terrible, but coaches know he/she has more potential than is shown. This may be an athlete with good defensive mental skills but he/she may be missing offensive mental skills such as confidence, comfort with risk or drive to set and achieve goals.

3) An athlete is unbeatable when on a roll, but he/she can also go into the tank for months at a time. He/she may have deficits in defensive mental skills, making him/her vulnerable to distracting thoughts and unable to do mental maintenance. The athlete also probably is lacking offensive mental skills and needs to improve in the areas of

competition mental planning, self-talk and confidence.

Offensive mental skills allow athletes to achieve greatness. Defensive mental skills gives them consistency and resiliency. Combine the two, and you have dominant athletes. Athletes missing one or the other of these skills are tremendously frustrating to coaches, because you know they can perform so much better than they do. If this model of mental skills is useful to you, talk about it with your athletes. By trying these invisible mental skills to visible results and using the simple Offense-Defence Model, you may find that fewer athletes resist the idea of developing mental strength.