



PRE-COMPETITIVE PREPARATION: DEVELOPING A MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL EDGE

Why is mental preparation important?

As athletes, you spend a lot of time on technical, tactical and physical preparation for competition. However, the ability to unleash this potential during competition depends largely on your mental skills.

Is mental preparation my responsibility?

Yes. An important theme for pre-competitive preparation is individual responsibility. Once the mental skills are learned, you'll probably do a better job of preparing yourself than a sport psychologist will. So, the aim of the SMSCS mental training program is not to prepare you ourselves. The aim is to develop skills that will help you prepare yourself. If each athlete prepares well individually, results should be positive.

Which mental skills will we cover?

Pre-competitive skills for competition include:

- self-regulation
- mental relaxation
- physical relaxation
- mental rehearsal or visualization

What is self-regulation?

How we feel before we compete has a lot to do with how we compete. Your "optimal pre-competitive state" is the mindset that has always been associated with excellent performances in your past. Said another way, it is the mindset you perform most effectively with. When preparing for competition, self-regulation involves understanding what your optimal pre-competitive state feels like, then using relaxation and visualization skills to get there.

How does self-regulation affect performance?

Identifying our optimal pre-competitive state is a key first step in good, consistent preparation. If we don't have a clear understanding of our OPS, we can relax and visualize before our competitions, but end up in very different mental states each time we do so. This produces inconsistency. It is imperative that we have a target for our pre-competitive preparation. The OPS is that target. Striving to achieve it will help eliminate the valleys and help us perform at consistently high levels.

How can I identify my optimal pre-competitive state?

Complete the following exercise to help identify your OPS.

- Recall a competition in which you performed particularly well
- Record where it was and who it was against
- Try to describe how you felt before this career performance. Two or three descriptors will do (e.g. edgy, anticipatory, confident).
- If you haven't had a career competition or can't recall how you felt before a career competition, no problem. Simply apply this exercise immediately after your next career performance. While things are fresh in your mind, record how you felt before you competed. As you go through a few career performances, a theme will emerge.

What you've just done is identify your optimal pre-competitive state. Again, the OPS is important because it provides a target for pre-competitive preparation. To summarize, let's look at an analogy. When we're sick, we wish to return to a healthy state. This is our goal or target. The doctor then prescribes a medication that will return us to a healthy state. When we're preparing for competition, we wish to reach our optimal pre-competitive state. This is our goal or target. As our own doctor, we then prescribe what is needed to get there. If we're considerably more stressed than our OPS, we'll probably prescribe mental and physical relaxation to reduce arousal to a more optimal level. If we're less interested than we have to be, we'll prescribe more visualization to boost arousal to a more optimal level. In both cases, we are self-regulating.

Mental relaxation, physical relaxation and visualization are skills that can help us achieve our OPS. Can you outline mental relaxation?

Mental relaxation is about anxiety or worry reduction. Before competition, we worry when we don't have as much control over the situation as we'd like. To decrease the worry, we must remind ourselves **WHAT WE CAN DO** about the situation.

To illustrate this point, let's look at the high performance skier who's never skied well on a particular hill before. When we ask what he's thinking in the starting gate, his response is that "I've never skied well on this hill before." This is a negative self-statement and what it reflects is worry.

To reduce the worry, this skier needs a positive self-statement that represents **WHAT HE CAN DO** to get down the hill quickly. What he comes up with is "Brush each gate." What he has now is an answer, a process goal he can apply to the race. If he can hit

each gate with a shoulder or a hip and stay upright, he will get to the bottom faster than ever before. This is a strategy that gives him the opportunity to think about something other than, "I've never skied well on this hill before."

How can I learn to mentally relax?

Complete the following mental relaxation exercise.

- Write down a negative self-statement that's used frequently. This will identify the source of concern or worry (Example (rowing): "This will get painful around 1200 metres").
- Develop a positive self-statement around WHAT YOU CAN DO about the worry (Example: Identify perhaps two main technical points that can keep you together from 1200 metres on. Then frame positive self-statements around these main points. Now, you have a process goal or two that can increase your feelings of control and reduce worry. At 1200 metres, you focus on these points one at a time for say, 20 strokes each. This helps maintain your rowing quality and gives you something constructive to think about besides the physical discomfort. Having these strategies in place is a huge point for pre-competitive confidence and mental refocusing during competition.

Can you outline physical relaxation?

Physical relaxation is about relaxing tight muscles. Tight muscles usually result from anxiety or worry. To get rid of tight muscles, you should try to reduce the anxiety or worry first (mental relaxation). If any residual tension is left afterward, then you try to physically relax it out of you.

There are many different physical relaxation techniques. We'll outline the following three:

· Progressive muscle relaxation

Alternately tensing then relaxing different muscle groups from the toes to the face. We should tense and relax each muscle group twice on the way up.

· Rhythmic breathing

Slowing the breathing cadence, scanning for residual tension and breathing this down the length of the body.

· Visualization of a relaxing setting

Visualizing the mental and physical sensations of a place that's been associated with relaxation in the past.

Preparation:

Lie on your back in a relaxed manner with the eyes closed. Begin to slow down the breathing a bit. Each time you inhale, breathe in a little slower and a little longer than you normally would. Each time you exhale, do exactly the same thing.

· Progressive muscle relaxation

Start with the toes and move upward to include the muscle groups you feel are important to your sport.

Example: Crunch the toes for a count of five, then relax that muscle group. In the relaxation phase, get back in touch with the long, slow breathing rhythm mentioned above. Maintain this until the tension in the muscle group has been replaced by relaxation. Move up the body tensing and relaxing different muscle groups (e.g. calves, quadriceps, abdominals, shoulders, facial muscles).

· Rhythmic breathing

Establish a long, slow breathing rhythm. Each time you exhale, try to visualize waves of tension being breathed down the length of the body. How do you do this? Try to visualize any tension in the face, neck, shoulders and arms being down the body and out the ends of the fingers. Try to visualize any tension in the chest, stomach, hips and legs being breathed down through those areas and out the ends of your toes. If you're making this fly, you're probably going to feel two sensations. One will be this sensation of waves of tension descending the body each time you exhale. The other sensation might be a tingling sensation at the ends of the fingers and toes since this is where the tension is "leaving" from.

· Visualization of a relaxing setting

Visualize a place that's been associated with relaxation in your past. Example: A beach at the ocean or lake. Relaxing sensations might include:

- the warmth of the sand and sunlight as you lie on the beach.
- the feeling of a light breeze as it moves across you.
- the sound of the waves in your ears.

Can you outline visualization?

Visualization can be used to rehearse our individual roles for competition. Certain visualization techniques can be used to increase pre-competitive arousal if that is needed. The following are four common sources of visualization:

· Pre-competitive state

Simply visualize the optimal pre-competitive state you have identified for yourself. Try to do two short sessions before competition in the interest of reaching your OPS. One would take place early in the day and the other would occur an hour and a half or so before competition.

- Competition plan

The number of training hours you have to prepare for other competitors is limited. The good news is that you have almost unlimited time to visualize the competition plan. The more you rehearse the competition plan and your role in it, the more it will be internalized for the competition. If it is locked in, you will react instinctively to what you see instead of having to think about it. This helps produce excellent performances. Rehearse the competition plan early and often.

- Mindset in confrontational situations

Visualize the mindset associated with success in confrontational situations. Think about rowing through another boat or digging the puck out of the corner against an opponent. There will be an assertive mindset associated with success and a more hesitant mindset associated with failure. Visualize the assertiveness associated with success.

- Strategies/self-statements

If there is a negative self-statement (source of worry or doubt), visualize the positive self-statement that goes with it. It represents something you can do about the concern. A goal you can take into battle. A source of confidence.