

Characteristics of Mentally Tough Athletes

One aspect of peak performance that many people agree on is the need for athletes to be mentally tough. What does that mean, though? In the world of sport psychology, there has been some disagreement about the best definition of mental toughness because it is such a complex factor in performance. Nevertheless, one study (Jones et. al., 2002) did an excellent job of identifying 10 critical traits that mentally tough athletes possess. Read the list below (along with our thoughts regarding each characteristic).

1. Having an unshakable belief in your ability to achieve your goals

This is more than just confidence - this is a conviction that is at the core of who you are. All of the “greats” have this mindset, that no matter the odds, they will achieve what they set out to do.

2. Regaining psychological control following unexpected or uncontrollable events

“Unexpected or uncontrollable events” can take many different forms, from big picture events (e.g., firing of a coach, etc.) to more day-to-day or even in-competition events (e.g., a blown call by an umpire or official). The ability to regain focus on the task at hand is what mental toughness is all about.

3. Bouncing back from performance setbacks with an increased determination to succeed

Every day will not be your best day. If that were the case, there would be a lot more world records broken on a much more regular basis - and you probably wouldn't be reading this, because you'd be busy filming a commercial for your most recent endorsement. The fact is, sometimes we experience setbacks in performance. Mentally tough athletes understand that this is OK, but come back the next day more focused, motivated, and determined to get back on track.

4. Pushing back the boundaries of physical and emotional pain, while still maintaining technique and effort under distress

Mentally tough athletes understand that to get the most out of every practice, race, or competition, it can sometimes mean pushing their bodies and minds to new limits - and each time they do, they increase the threshold for what they can take the next practice or competition. Mentally tough athletes *associate* with the pain they experience, rather than attempt to *disassociate* from it. By doing this, they learn what it feels like to truly push themselves - the pain is positive feedback that they are correctly testing their physical and mental limits.

Characteristics of Mentally Tough Athletes (cont.)

5. Having an unshakable belief that you possess unique qualities and abilities that make you better than your opponent

When you become mentally tough, you develop the mindset that your biggest advantage in competition is *you* - your opponent(s) do/does not possess the same strengths and qualities that you have. Understand what your strengths are what qualities and abilities make you who you are as an athlete? Looking for a competitive advantage? Look in the mirror.

6. Thriving on the pressure of competition

Think about some of the most successful and historic athletes within your sport. Beyond their greatness, something they all likely have in common are their love of “big” moments and games, and their desire to compete and win. Mentally tough athletes *want* the pressure of competition - it helps them to be at their best. They don't view the situation as “pressure” at all, and therefore there is no sense of anxiety. They look at these scenarios as challenges, as the reason that they get up and play every day, which helps them rise to the occasion.

7. Accepting competition anxiety and knowing that you can handle it

See #6 above.

8. Not being negatively affected by your opponents' performances

Mentally tough athletes understand that they cannot control their opponents' performance, so whether their competition is playing extremely poorly or extremely well, it does not detract from their focus - to be goal-driven and process-oriented. A mentally tough athlete brings the same focus, energy, and effort regardless of what their opponents presents.

9. Remaining fully focused on the task at hand in the face of distractions

Each time you choose to focus on things like the opponent, the score, the officials/referees, the weather, the fans, something in the past, or something in the future, you are *not* focused on the task at hand. There are a limited number of relevant things to focus on during competition (e.g., relevant internal and relevant external cues), and a laundry list of items that can be distractions - mentally tough athletes *choose* to filter out the distractions because they are irrelevant for helping them be at their best. For mentally tough athletes, the focus is solely on the things that will help them stay dialed in to the present moment - and nothing else.



Characteristics of Mentally Tough Athletes (cont.)

10. Being able to switch a sport focus on and off as needed

Mentally tough athletes can also lead healthy, balanced lifestyles. They make proper decisions off the field and keep athletic/life goals in mind, while remaining committed to self and team visions for success. However, they also allow themselves the freedom to have fun and disengage from sport entirely, when it's appropriate or necessary. When they get to the training facility or when they put their gear on, they switch to their sport focus, taking time to get into the right performance mindset. When they remove their gear, though, or leave the facility, they leave behind sport concerns. Mentally tough athletes are present focused on and off the field, so when they leave the field, these athletes maintain that present focus in whatever they are doing - in the classroom, with friends and family, or in the community.

Want to learn more about mental toughness? Contact us at 864.239.4110.