

Mental Preparation & Sports Psychology for Judo

A Primer by Mark Lonsdale

Sports psychology helps athletes control their minds and bodies to produce optimum sporting performance. It is also a critical part of coaching, communications and team building. Sports psychology is all about mental toughness, focus, confidence, stress management, optimal arousal, motivation and commitment.

In any sport, including judo, the mental aspects of competition are every bit as important as the physical aspects, but often neglected. These mental skills are not just for the high performance elite athletes, but also for the recreational competitor struggling with the stresses of training for competitions and *shiai*. As Henry Ford said, "Whether you think you can, or think you can't, you're right." In other words, if you do not wholeheartedly believe in yourself, then you will probably fail. Thinking or, more importantly, believing that you can, is the first step towards achieving a goal or winning a tournament.

At the international level, it is assumed that elite athletes are all at a similar level of physical fitness, strength, endurance, technical proficiency, and experience. Look at the winning results in almost any Olympic sport and you will see that races and competitions are won by a hundredth of a second or a tenth of an inch. So in looking for that winning edge, it often comes down to mental preparation and attitude.

In addition to fitness, technical & tactical skills, and experience, winning requires desire, determination, dedication, and sacrifice, all of which require mental toughness. Mental toughness is the psychological edge that helps an athlete to perform at a consistently high level.

Mentally tough athletes commonly exhibit four characteristics:

1. A strong self-belief (confidence) in their ability to perform well
2. An internal motivation or drive to be successful
3. The ability to focus thoughts and feelings without distraction
4. Composure under pressure

To aid in mental preparation, there are a number of skills to be studied, learned and applied to training and competition. The six mental skills for successful athletes are:

1. The ability to concentrate and refocus
2. Visualization and mental rehearsal
3. Energizing
4. Relaxation & breathing
5. Maintaining a positive attitude
6. Self motivation and being goal oriented

In training, the coach and athlete need to set a series of attainable goals and markers. Mental attitude will improve as these markers are achieved. Successful athletes set short and long-term goals that are realistic, measurable, and time-oriented. You and your coach should be aware of your current performance levels and be able to develop specific detailed plans for attaining the next level. You must be highly committed to your goals and to the daily demands of your training programs. Knowing that you have trained harder and smarter than your opponents will put you in a positive frame of mind.

Pre-competition, an athlete must eliminate all personal issues and problems well before the championship. You cannot afford to be distracted by financial debts, rocky relationships, or

personal conflicts. Your weight management routine must be on track to make your fighting weight category. From experience, you should have established a pre-tournament routine that begins the afternoon before the event. This may include a light workout, sauna, massage, carb-loading, or just relaxing, resting, and packing your gear bag for the next morning. Pre-tournament rituals are an important part of mental preparation.

On competition day, be prepared to arrive early, rested and focused on the event. Allow time for warming up, stretching and taping. Know any changes to the IJF rules and have your coach attend the coaches brief and referees meeting for any updates. Keep thinking positive – this is no time to be having doubts.

On game day athletes will perform better at optimum arousal, the mental state that puts an athlete “in the zone.” This is also known as the Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning (IZOF) since the model suggests that the zone of optimal emotional and physiological intensity varies for each individual athlete. Anger, as one example, is a double edged sword since it can increase drive, energy, and power, but clouds thinking and decreases thought processes necessary for planning and game strategy.

When you enter the arena or step onto the mat, do so with a positive attitude. Recite your mantra, “This is my day, this is my purpose....,” and maintain the proverbial *Eye of the Tiger*. Focus on fighting each fight, not thinking about the finals or the medal ceremony.

Successful athletes know what they must pay attention to during each game or sporting situation. They have learned how to maintain focus and resist distractions, whether they come from the environment or from within themselves. They are able to regain their focus when concentration is lost during competition, and have learned how to play in the “here-and-now,” without regard to either past or future events. In judo, conscious thought process is too slow when fighting. Attacks, combinations and counters must come from conditioned response and reflex. Seeing an opponent’s attack and thinking what you can do to counter it will be too slow. Judo is about confidence and feel – the confidence that comes with hard training and the feel that comes from repetition and experience.

Dominating and winning in any combat sport requires that the fighter respond reflexively to the opponent’s attacks. What is often termed muscle memory is in reality conditioned response to external stimuli. It is also not wise to worry about the opponent’s strategy or tactics. By taking your fight to him or her, and by attacking relentlessly, you are keeping the opponent off balance and reacting to you.

To conclude, just as the following apply to most successful athletes, they could work for you:

1. Choose and maintain a positive attitude
2. Maintain a high level of self-motivation
3. Set realistic and attainable goals
4. Deal effectively with other competitors and officials
5. Use positive self-talk (mantra)
6. Use positive mental imagery (visualization)
7. Manage anxiety & emotions effectively (coping mechanisms)
8. Maintain concentration (focus)
9. Fight each fight and then move onto the next one
10. Manage your time and energy wisely between matches