



Mental Toughness for Players

Competition finds personal weaknesses and shows no mercy! This is happening everyday in the lives hockey players young and old. What weaknesses am I referring to? I am referring to the mental and emotional weaknesses we all live with day to day. The fear of failure, self-limiting thinking, low self-esteem, poor anger management skills, and self-defeating thoughts are all issues that I am referring to. The sport of hockey is revealing a serious problem and it is hurting kids of all ages involved in the game of hockey!

Kids invest enormous amounts of time trying to become better hockey players. They attend various camps to become better skaters, stick handlers, shooters, and overall more accomplished hockey players. However, there seems to be more to becoming "The best you can be" than simply developing these important physical skills. In fact there is. When a coach is trying to help his team perform at their best before a big game or tournament he does not say go and stick handle or lift weights prior to the game. He says, "Make sure you are mentally prepared for the game."

What does it mean to be a mentally prepared athlete? To me it means; to possess the ability to mentally and physically engage in the game, without any emotional or mental interference, leading to an athlete performing consistent with or at times above their level of competency. The ability to be mentally prepared is every bit important as being physically prepared however; the skills associated with this type of preparation are rarely worked on and therefore go undeveloped until there is a visible problem. Some of the problems that appear are; An athlete loses their cool and acts in an out of control manner resulting in severe consequences to the team and the individual, a highly skilled athlete underachieves leaving those that know them wondering what might be going on, the joy of the game fades away without any visible reason, and player simply decides the game is no longer fun and quits. All of these and more are signs of a player that is lacking some skills in the mental toughness category. What is to follow is a basic list of mental toughness skills that can be developed and utilized during competition leading to greater satisfaction and self-esteem and a decrease of self-defeating behavior.

The first skill is a thought skill called "Framing". Every one of us continually interacts with the events of our life daily. When something happens in our lives we see it and interpret it through a mental frame of our own making. That mental frame either results in us feeling positive or negative about the event that just occurred. Picture a player that attempted a difficult pass and just misses it. Because of that risky play the other team gets a scoring chance. That player comes back to the bench and now uses their mental frames to explain that event to themselves, we refer to this as an athlete that "Talks to themselves" When an athlete continually creates negative mental frames they have difficulty performing because they are consistently overcome by negative emotion. This is referred to as self-sabotaging thought. This is something that can be overcome with

training and awareness. There are many players finding a renewed spirit because of their ability to “Reframe” their events during the course of the game resulting in greater confidence and ability to overcome mistakes. One player recently commented to me that he has played with more confidence because he feels stronger mentally because of this skill.

The next skill has to do with overcoming adversity. I define adversity as; anything that gets in the way of accomplishing a goal”. During the course of a game each team is trying persistently to create an advantage on the other. Because of this the momentum shifts back and forth often, putting pressure on players to deal with disappointing events and still perform with focus and intensity. Some players seem to deal with adversity in a manner that raises their capacity to perform whereas; others are set back sometimes never to return to the mindset needed to overcome and climb back into game. When this happens game in and game out the love for the game and the satisfaction derived from the game at one time diminishes and goes away. Many players in the face of adversity simply give up and therefore, are never able to respond to a negative event in a positive manner. Dr. Paul Stoltz author of “The Adversity Quotient” speaks of four areas to put emphasis when managing adversity.

1. Control- putting mental and physical energy into those things that only we have control over.
2. Ownership- being responsible to emotionally own that which we are responsible for accounting for the adversity to begin with.
3. Reach- managing adverse challenges when we face them so as not to accumulate them resulting in having them negatively influence the various other roles we play in life.
4. Endurance- Letting go of unfortunate situations so our confidence is not impacted by past events.

When athletes learn adversity management skills the stressful elements of the game become more easily handled resulting in more fulfillment and overall satisfaction.

The third skill is goal setting. When most hockey players set goals they do so to measure assists, goals, goals against average or plus minus. However, the purpose of a goal is to simply focus energy. Therefore, the most important goal for a hockey player to set is what Shane Murphy calls “Action Focused Goals”. These are goals that are set by the player to focus their energy on what they have control over. When a hockey player focuses their energy on what they have control over they are more likely to fairly evaluate their performance because their evaluation can take on a broader scope than simply wins losses, goals and assists. When this occurs a player can improve any aspect of the game they want to because they begin to see how they have control rather than someone or something outside of himself or herself. When control is given away athletes have a “give up” attitude.

When hockey players learn to positively frame anything that happens during the course of the game, effectively manage their way through the ups and downs adversity brings, and set action focused goals to focus the mental and physical energy they bring into the game they develop an ability to take the kinds of dynamics that are setting many players back and to truly develop the “Mental Edge” on their competition. How are you doing in these areas? Perfection is not the goal with any of these components but a new awareness of the power one develops when they acquire the “Mental Toughness Skills” that allow for the personal power to take any situation and make it a positive one leading to greater enjoyment of a game that is my opinion is the best there is.

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