

Introduction

The strongest coaches prepare players by developing their mental fitness along with their physical fitness and squash skills. Becoming mentally fit requires training in the same way that becoming physically fit does; players need to identify areas for improvement and consciously work to improve. Often, athletes go into matches relying primarily on their physical and technical abilities with little to no consciousness on how their mental fitness comes into play. Preparing athletes from the beginning of the season to be mentally fit, not just before matches, will help strengthen their mental fitness in the long term.

Overview

This guide outlines various ways that coaches can help athletes build their mental fitness.

Mental Fitness Skills

- Self-talk
- Goal-setting
- Reflections
- Journaling
- Visualization
- Breathing
- Cue Words

Pre-Match Mental Fitness

- Managing arousal levels
- Focusing on self

Post-Match Debrief

Building Mental Fitness in Practice

Talk about and provide opportunities to strengthen athletes' mental fitness in practice. Explain that the mental fitness is just as important as the physical and technical factors of the sport; athletes who are mentally fit are able to regulate their emotions, stay focused, push through under pressure, and be the person in control on court. Below are a some strategies to use in helping athletes develop their mental fitness.

Self-talk: Help athletes realize that, during a practice or match, they are constantly talking to themselves in their heads, and that the way they talk to themselves can help them perform better or worse. Coach athletes to focus on what is in their control, and to replace negative thoughts with positive ones. Below are some examples of ways to switch negative self-talk to positive self-talk.

- ❑ **Use positive commands.** Your body does what your brain visualizes. When you say, "Don't mess up," your brain visualizes you messing up. Switch from negative commands to positive ones. Instead of saying, "Don't serve out," tell yourself, "Keep the serve in" and visualize where you want the ball to go.
- ❑ **Focus on what you can control.** After a mistake or failure, don't get stuck thinking that you aren't good or can't win, or that it's someone else's fault. Instead, acknowledge you made a mistake and then focus on what you can control - the next point. For example, instead of saying, "I suck. I'm going to lose," tell yourself, "I missed that drop shot. I was hanging too far back. Next time I need to get back to the T faster."

Goal-setting: Setting goals gives athletes something to work towards and enables them to reflect on their progress. Work with your athletes to set S.M.A.R.T. goals.

Specific: Goals should clearly define what, why, and how.

Measurable: Tangible goals enable clear evaluation of progress.

Achievable: Goals should be challenging but reachable.

Relevant: Choose goals that will have the greatest impact on the overall goal of improving your game.

Time-bound: Set a timeline for check-ins and completion of your goal.

Below are examples of strong goals.

- ❑ *Practice example:* I'm going to improve my serve by staying 10 minutes after practice everyday to work on my serve, and strive to get 60% of my serves in during those 10 minutes.
- ❑ *Game example:* I'm going to make the majority of the points last longer than 3 shots.

Below are some tips for setting goals with athletes.

- ❑ At the start of the season, set both short-term and long-term goals so that athletes can consistently work toward something and then celebrate their progress.
- ❑ Have a goal other than "winning the match." Create an environment that focuses on process as opposed to just the outcome. For example, set a goal of getting 95% of serves in, or of having 90% of your shots land in the corners.
- ❑ The most effective goals will be related to recent training (e.g. improving recovery technique).
- ❑ Help players visualise their success in achieving their goals.

Reflections: Whenever your athletes get off court from drilling or playing a match ask them how it went, how they feel, what can they work on for next time. This will get athletes talking out loud about their game and reflecting on the aspects of the game that they need

to work on. Encourage the athletes to reflect on their own performance, rather than just telling them what needs to change.

Journaling: Give athletes a physical journal and set aside five minutes before and five minutes after practices or matches to jot down their thoughts about the practice/match and their own mindset. Allow athletes to write or draw freely related to this topic; images and song lyrics can be just as helpful as words. Invite and encourage athletes to share their journals with you so that you can support them in working toward their goals.

- ❑ Pre-practice/match: Have athletes write down any relevant information that could affect their performance that day. Encourage them to coach themselves in how to make the practice/match successful by using positive self-talk and setting goals.
- ❑ Post-practice/match: Have athletes reflect on how the practice/match went. What did they do well? What do they need to improve? What steps can they take to improve?

Visualization: Visualization involves imagining a performance, or a specific element of a performance, in advance of the performance. Athletes who can visualize themselves succeeding in their goals are more likely to achieve their goals.

- ❑ **In practice**, athletes can use visualization with specific drills. For example, when a drill involves hitting a target, demonstrate the correct technique and then ask your athletes to visualize themselves doing it correctly and hitting the target. During the drill, stop as needed to bring back the visualization.
- ❑ **Prior to matches**, have players visualise their game plan. For example, you might have them visualize hitting good lengths, nailing their drop shots, hitting wall targets and landing points, or striking the ball on the "sweet spot" of the racquet. You might also have players mentally rehearse key aspects of the game in anticipation of specific challenges. For example, if the player struggles with referee decisions, have them rehearse how they will respond if the referee makes a call they disagree with.

Breathing: Telling athletes to just "breathe" doesn't mean much if they don't know how to effectively breathe in a way that adjusts their mental state. Breathing effectively during a match will help deregulate the players nervous system helping the player feel less anxious and more in the moment. Taking deep breaths in through the nose and out through the mouth allows more oxygen into the lungs which helps speed up the recovery from physical fatigue. Breathing effectively also gives players a chance to refocus and to check in with themselves. During a match scenario players can practice taking long deep breaths in between points, before a serve, or after a long challenging point. Deeper breathing routines for post match play can be found in the additional sources at the end of this document.

Below are a few tips.

- ❑ Most people take shallow breaths and only fill their lungs. When breathing to relax or refocus, take deep breaths and allow your full diaphragm to fill with air. Your stomach should move more than your lungs do.
- ❑ Breathing can be used to energize or to relax depending on the type of breathe you take.
- ❑ Breathing can also be used as a refocusing strategy. Having the athlete focus on his/her breathe rather than performance can help them achieve their goals.
- ❑ Going through workshops of circle breathes or ratio breathing could help the athlete better understand what would work for them in a given scenario.

Cue Words: Cue words are a simple thought-adjusting technique. The athlete 1) recognizes an unproductive thought, 2) comes up with a more positive word that is meaningful to them, and 3) uses that word to refocus with a more positive mindset. Individual athletes might have cue words specific to them, and/or teams might have cue words that apply to everyone. Encourage your athletes to try out different cue words and find a few that work for them. They can use sport-specific words, or words and phrases from favorite songs, shows, or their family/culture. Below are some examples.

- ❑ A team who prides itself on giving their all uses the cue word, “Dig deep” to push themselves when they are tired toward the end of a match.
- ❑ An athlete who gets anxious during matches uses the cue word, “Breathe” between points and takes a moment to take two deep breaths.
- ❑ An athlete who gets frustrated and stuck on the point he just missed says, “Next point” to help him let go of the prior point and focus on winning the next one.
- ❑ An athlete whose goal is to move her opponent thinks of the cue words, “Move her” between each point.

Pre-Match Mental Fitness

In addition to using the strategies described above (breathing, visualization, cue words, etc.), athletes should be aware of what activities help them prepare mentally immediately before a match.

Arousal Levels

Nerves before a match are normal; understanding whether those nerves are facilitative or debilitating is key to helping the athlete plan their pre-performance routine. Each athlete is different: some athletes perform better when they are highly aroused and some perform better when they are calm and unaroused. Players should consider whether they need to

relax or to energize before a match, and come up with individual routines to help them. Below are some strategies for both of these pre-game states.

Over-Arousal: If athletes are so anxious before a match that it negatively impacts their performance, here are some strategies they might consider to help them relax and focus.

- Hum a tune and get a fluent walking pattern
- Swing the racquet to gain rhythm
- Breathe deeply and slowly and exhale slowly
- Flex, hold, and then relax all muscles in the body individually
- Visualize the desired performance
- Stretch and breathe

Under-Arousal: If athletes need to pump themselves up before a match, here are some strategies they might consider.

- Increase their heart rate by going for a short run or riding a bike
- Listen to music
- Stretch

Focus on Self

While supporting ones' teammates and learning about one's opponents is important, when an athlete prepares for her match, she needs to focus on herself and what she can control. Below are a few examples.

- Squash players can and will watch their opponents warm up, but they should be watching them through the lens of "what will I do" instead of "what will they do."
- Team matches may put extra pressure, or less pressure, on the final players to win. Help athletes remember that their only responsibility is to play the best that they can in their match.

Post-Match Debrief

After a match, check in with your students. Rather than focusing on the outcome ("Did you win?"), ask questions that elicit thoughtfulness and reflection. Below are some sample questions.

- How did you play today?
- What did you do well?
- Did you do anything you're proud of?
- Did the match reveal any challenges that you need to work on? (i.e. need to be able to get the ball deeper, need to be able to volley serves, etc.)
- Did you make any mistakes that you can learn from? (i.e. not moving the opponent enough, serving out at key moments, etc.)

- ❑ Did you try anything new today?

After a loss: Recognize what happened and work together to come up with a plan/goal for future performances. Comfort athletes, but still have the tough conversations that lead to growth. Below are some examples.

- ❑ It's okay. Everybody wins and everybody loses. Today you lost. The key is what you do with your loss. If you just feel bad about it, then that's all it is - a loss. But if you reflect on it and use it to improve, it is also a learning experience, and those are invaluable. That's why we play matches in the first place. They're fun, but they also help us get better by showing us what we need to improve.
- ❑ Yes, you lost, but that doesn't make you a bad player. It just means that this time, you didn't perform well enough to beat your opponent. You are still a talented player, and this loss showed you ways that you can get better. What did you learn from the match?
- ❑ Yes, you lost. He was a stronger player than you, and we have work to do to make you better. You can play like that he did too. We just need to practice. You did do some things well in the match. Can you think of what you did well? (ex: You always served to his weak hand side, you hustled for every point, and you got all but two serves in.) Those were goals we had set for you, and I'm proud you accomplished them. Let's think about what new goals we should set for you based on this match. What do you need to improve on?

After a win: Avoid simply saying "Great job!". Share specific praise related to what the student did that enabled him/her to win. Here are some examples.

- ❑ You did a great job! I know you've been practicing hitting deeper for weeks now, and it really paid off in that match.
- ❑ Your footwork and fitness really made a difference in this match. The fact that you've spent so much time lately improving how quickly you move around the court made it extra difficult for him/her to put the ball somewhere you couldn't get to.
- ❑ That was a great match. What do you think you did well, and what can you work on improving?

Additional Resources

- ❑ [How to Breathe Deeply](#) - A brief guide by WebMD on how to breathe deeply.
- ❑ [Three-Part Breath](#)- A brief article on Dirga Pranayama Breathing.
- ❑ [Breathing in Sports](#) - A brief article on the effects of breathing on the body.
- ❑ [Coaching Mental Toughness for Youth - Part 1](#) - An article by Spencer Wood Ph.D, an author and trainer of athletes and coaches in the area of Championship Mental Skills & Toughness Training.

- ❑ [How Can I Help My Child Develop Mental Toughness?](#) - An article by sports psychologist Lesley-Anne Pedlar about how to help children develop mental toughness.
- ❑ [Using Goal Setting as a Way to Increase Confidence](#) Miller, J. T., & McAuley, E. (1987). Effects of a goal-setting training program on basketball free-throw self-efficacy and performance. *The Sport Psychologist*, 1(2), 103-113.
- ❑ [Youtube Video on Breathing](#)- A brief video on some post match breathing routines.

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