

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO RAISING CONFIDENT, FOCUSED AND RESILIENT ATHLETES



HOW YOUR CHILD CAN BECOME UNSTOPPABLE



COACH GAD



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Dedication

Before I had a message.

Before I had a movement.

There were inspirations.

Those inspirations, the reason I played big and continue to do so, even when it's so damn difficult, are my parents Luz Mariana and Ricardo.

I hope someday this book (and the results) will make them proud to be its motivation.

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Chapter 1: The Mind Leads the Body

*“Your Mind is precious, it has the power to
unlock infinite options and possibilities.”*

— Joel Annesley

Mt. Kilimanjaro

I used to run some fitness classes during the day, where I happen to meet a lot of people. One day, in particular, I happened to meet a woman (let's call her Cindy) whom I did not recognize. Over the course of our conversation, she mentioned that her job took her around the world, so she didn't frequent the gym very much. As we continued to talk, I told her that my actual occupation is that of a “mental skills high-performance coach.” She asked me to explain a little more of what that meant. I told her that, essentially, I'm a “brain trainer.” I help empower athletes of all ages, so they can harness the incredible potential of their minds in order to reach the outer limits of their potential.

At this point, her eyes grew big, and with a cheeky smile she said, “I know exactly what you mean. The mind is such an amazing thing and what you do is powerful.”

Then, she proceeded to tell me the following amazing story. She told me that on one occasion, she happened to be in Tanzania for work, and during her stay there, she was given some time off. During this time, she had prepared herself for the climb of Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest peak in Africa and the fourth highest in the world. The climb is no small feat, as you probably know. I was quick to ask her if she was a regular climber because to be honest, she didn't look like an athlete and/or climber, and she was probably anywhere from her mid-40s to mid-50s. I wouldn't say she was out of shape, but she also was not someone you would call a “gym rat.”

She proceeded to tell me that no, she wasn't a climber per se but more of a hiker; that she liked to hike and because she knew she would have this free time while she was there, she decided to book the climb and see how far she could get. She said that in her party, there were 20 people who were starting the climb, of which she described sixteen to be a combination of fitness instructors, gym rats, and overall healthy active looking people. Whereas, the remaining four, as she categorized herself, were what you would call normal, everyday people. She told us that if you were to take a poll of who you thought would make it to the top, none of her group of four would be chosen.

She continued to tell the story that the climb started out normally, but as they went past what she believes was the midway point, they ran into a blizzard. It was not just any blizzard, as she would later find out. Rather, this was the worst blizzard that the mountain had seen in 30 years! During this time, as you can imagine, several climbers turned back and/or halted their climb to ride out the storm. She, however, continued the climb. While the storm kept blasting them, one of their guides slipped and injured himself quite badly, to a point that he thought he wasn't going to make it down alive!

I couldn't imagine the emotional distress that some of the climbers were going through as all this was taking place. As Cindy continued her story, she told us that at one point, when she thought and hoped they were inching closer to the peak, she looked up and all she could see was a line of lights as far as her eye could see. She told us that this was quite demoralizing. She had thought that she was getting closer to the peak, but each light represented another climber still ahead of her. In her eyes, it was hundreds, if not thousands, of climbers ahead of her. Thus, the peak was still far in the distance. From that moment, she told herself that she wasn't going to look up again. Instead, she would try to just focus on the next step in front of her and try to control her breathing.

Cindy told me that she made a decision of having a mindset of taking one step at a time and focusing on her inner strength and motivation, because she felt this above all else would give her the best chance of not only reaching the summit but most importantly of staying alive! That's how dire the situation was. With this strategy, she persevered through one of the worst storms the mountain has ever seen, and she reached the top.

The most interesting factor of this story was that, out of the twenty climbers who started the ascent up the mountain, only three made it to the summit. Of those three, only one was from the group that Cindy described as being physically very fit and most likely to succeed, whereas the other two represented your average person, as she described it. Cindy wagered that the blizzard was not the defining factor in the amount of climbers to make it to the summit; but in fact, she said, "I'm convinced it was the power of the mind above all else of each individual, that got us to the top." She learned that it was her thought process that kept her focused and emotionally under control despite trying circumstances, whereas she could see others, who were as physically prepared as you could be, dwindle when the situation seemed dire. "Fear and doubt got the best of them," Cindy said.

When reflecting back on that experience, Cindy feels confident that the mind is much more powerful than our physical bodies and that, mental toughness, is the key to great achievement. She also said that, because of this experience, she understood exactly what I was

teaching young athletes and that they would benefit tremendously not only on the athletic arena, but it offers great life-skills as well.

I kept thinking about that incredible story. If the mind can get an average person with no formal training to do great things, then imagine what could happen if you applied mental skills training to a young, talented, and driven person! It will propel them to heights they probably never even imagined.

In the words of Aneta Cruz, “Your mind is your greater power, use it well.” This ‘greater power’ is what I offer any athlete through this book. It is this guide of how to harness ones ‘mental strength’ that an athlete can use to reach their peak performance potential!

So whether you’re the athlete yourself, the parent of an athlete or a coach and your goal is taking performance to the next level, this book will be the catalyst to that!

I’ve combined over thirty-five years of experience as a former professional athlete, parent of two competitive athletes and coach of university, national and professional level athletes to put together a unique and proven ‘mental-toughness’ program that is very practical.

Besides providing a baseline understanding of why it’s important for an athlete to train their brain, this book also builds a foundation for basic strong mental-health principals such as the development of powerful self-esteem. From there I teach mental-skills tools that an athlete (and team) can easily incorporate into their normal routines to help them better prepare mentally for competition.

The results are athletes learn to control their thoughts and emotions and can turn anxiety, doubt and frustration into confidence, focus and resiliency! They will be embedding ‘success-thinking patterns’ so positive, clear thinking becomes a habit. As you can surely understand these life-skills will be of tremendous benefit on and off the athletic arena.

From Challenge to Catalyst

I run many ‘Mental Toughness’ workshops and at the beginning I start by giving everyone a quick summary of my athletic and coaching experience. It starts with these bullet points:

- Former professional soccer player (10 years)
- Started playing professionally at the age of seventeen

- Played at a FIFA Youth World Cup
- Received a full athletic scholarship
- I have been coaching for over 25 years
- I have coached over 20 athletes that have represented their country at World Championships and Olympics games.
- Etc.

When I finish my introduction, I can sense that I have caught the interest of many in the crowd. A lot of athletes dream about getting a scholarship or going professional and representing their country. What my athletes don't know yet is that my athletic journey was filled with anxiety and emotional distress, including countless bouts of anger; two episodes of deep depression; several difficult injuries to overcome, and, in general, an overwhelming sense that I didn't enjoy what should have been a very pleasant, if not euphoric, part of my life.

I never told my parents about it and no one suspected anything because on the outside everything seemed fine. At the time, I thought that it was just me going through this experience. However, my many years of coaching has taught me that every young athlete, no matter their amount of talent and no matter how good things seem to be going, will face situations that will test their mental toughness. These situations are key to development, and although some parents may think their child is mentally strong and capable of overcoming these hurdles (or maybe the young athletes think this themselves), what I've learned over the years is that it's not about overcoming the obstacle that matters most. Rather, the key to unlocking unlimited potential is using the roadblock as a springboard to another level of development.

In other words, the athlete needs to understand how to transform their challenge into a catalyst to propel themselves to the next level of performance, which will ultimately help them reach their athletic goals and, quite possibly, get them to a level of performance that they didn't think was possible.

Imagine athletes being able to face challenges head-on with courage, knowing that no matter what the situation in front of them, it's going to help them in the long run. This type of mindset produces a consistent level of confidence that shows in a young athlete's performances. It helps them keep focused on what they need to do to succeed, and it ultimately allows them to be mentally and emotionally stable so they can appreciate and enjoy their journey.

I work with a lot of talented, driven, young athletes, and nothing pains me more than when I speak to parents and hear the anguish in their voice when they explain the feeling of

helplessness they experience when their child is struggling mentally and emotionally. This feeling may lead us, as parents, to say and do things that just seem to exacerbate the situation and despite our best intentions, make the situation worse and even drive a wedge into our relationship with our child.

This book allows a parent, coach and the athlete themselves to be an agent of change to effectively learn how to develop that winning mindset that maximizes the use of all the hard work put into developing the technical and physical skills needed to achieve their dream. It helps throw gasoline on the flame of motivation that is paramount to success!

As a coach, parent, and former player, I have seen it from all angles and to varying degrees. Young, talented athletes who experience enormous pressure will often succumb to all the demands placed on them. It starts as athletes not performing to their potential, and, if not addressed, leads to a lose of enjoyment in the sport they use to love and worst-case scenario they quit all together.

I see and hear about it all the time, and I will tell you that you can't blame young athletes nowadays. Their schedules are so rigid, most of their time is organized for them, and there is less and less time for free play. Today, athletes barely have the time to just be kids and/or young adults. So, it's no wonder why they are overwhelmed, stressed, and struggle to cope at times.

It is important to highlight that this book isn't only for athletes that maybe struggling with level of performance, anxiety, frustration etc. Rather, I would think that it is just as important for athletes who are yet to face the tough challenges. By learning my simple 6 mental-game tools, any athlete will be better capable of addressing the roadblocks that are sure to arrive. The result is by overcoming the roadblocks an athlete will have newfound confidence and resiliency and they will be in a much better position to flourish. The other scenario (and the worst one) is that an athlete doesn't show signs of struggling emotionally on the outside, but instead on the inside, is where it's all building up. This was my situation.

Mental and emotional struggles many times isn't worn on the outside. It happens inside quietly and simultaneously limiting beliefs begin to be ingrained in athletes' brain that begins to shape their real-world thinking. It's key to get into an athlete's mind sooner rather than later so success-thinking patterns are ingrained instead and with that deep positive self-esteem is built which is the springboard for higher levels of belief and performance.

Unlike what most people think and do, athletic achievement is not won in the gym, or with more hours and reps on the ice, court or any athletic field, it's won in between the ears! Reaching full potential is done by training the brain. It's done by having mental tools and a

strategic plan to deal with and overcome adversity. It's done by learning to become a MENTALLY TOUGH individual. This provides the ability to absorb failure and regular setbacks and continue to not only fight on but to thrive.

Most individuals don't reach their dream not because they don't have the talent but because they fail to understand the importance of being mentally prepared, so they have the capacity to endure the hard and long road of athletics. Don't fall into this category become a MENTALLY-TOUGH athlete!

Parent, Coach, Athlete, I want you to know that I am passionate about what I do, so much so that in this book you have access to my unique Mental Toughness Coaching (M.T.C.) program, the same one I've used to coach athletes that have gone on to succeed at World Championships and Olympic games. The same one I coach professional athletes in North America and Europe except you got it at a fraction of the cost.

The reason I do this is because my belief is that mental-toughness training should be made available for everyone, at any age, level and background as it offers so many life-skill benefits. I also want to be that mentor I wish I had growing up. That person that would've been there to help me overcome obstacles, fears and provide some much-needed direction.

I appreciate you trusting me and allowing me to mentor you to higher levels of mental-strength and athletic performance. This book is a roadmap to get there, now let's begin...

Chapter 2: My Real Story

“Every great achievement is the victory of a flaming heart”

— *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Deep Inside

I will always remember this moment clearly: myself, eleven-years-old, sitting in front of my television alone, watching the 1982 World Cup final between Italy and (at the time) West Germany. In the 23rd minute of the second half, I saw something that would change my life forever. The Italian player Marco Tardelli scored to make it 2-0 in favor of Italy. His celebration after he scored is one of the most unadulterated demonstrations of emotion of any athlete, in any sport, ever. To me, it stands as the greatest celebration after a goal in sports history.

You see, after he scores the goal, he can't control himself, and he begins to run around and cry like a baby, with his arms flaring in the air, as if trying to find someone to hug (I still get goosebumps to this day when I tell the story!). As he recalls it, Marco describes the moment he scored as his brain trying to remember everything within a few seconds: his athletic journey through the triumphs, the struggles, the dream, the honor to represent his country, and then the crescendo of being so close to winning the ultimate prize that he just let out his raw emotion.

Italy lifted the world cup trophy that day, and, living in the region known as little Italy in Toronto, Canada, I could hear the celebrations in the streets well into the late-night hours. I remember I hardly slept that night; I had stirred up emotion of how Tardelli scored and celebrated his goal and how it made so many people feel so good. That night, my life goals became as clear as day to me. I wanted to grow up and not only be a professional soccer player but I knew I wanted to represent Canada at a World Cup, and score the game-winning goal so that I could celebrate like Marco Tardelli. I also knew that if I could achieve this I would probably be known as the greatest Canadian soccer player ever.

Up until that point, I enjoyed playing soccer, and I felt that I was pretty good at it. I had always hoped that I could eventually make pro, but after watching the World Cup final, my goals had shifted. It was no longer just *hoping*—I knew it was what I badly wanted to do one day! From that point onwards, I was very focused and motivated, and things couldn't have gone much better for me. I was the captain for most of the teams I played on, the player everyone relied upon to make a difference. Soon, I became known as what people refer to as a “blue-chip prospect,” which is a talented young athlete who has all the tools to likely make it

pro one day. Then, at the age of 15, I encountered the first of a series of events that were to change the course of my career and life.

I remember it clearly. It was a warm summer day and I was playing a competitive soccer game like any other. However, this time, an over eager defender lunged himself at me, accidentally on purpose (my opinion), and kicked me really hard on my right dominant leg. At the time, it didn't seem like much however it turned out to be my first serious injury. My right shin swelled up and became a large hematoma, roughly the size of a softball. I was not able to play for several weeks as I waited for the swelling to subside. However, as I returned to play, there was still a lot of bruising, and I continued to feel numbness from my shin down to my toes. After a month without much improvement, I began to get really worried. My game was all about skill, controlling and manipulating the ball as to trick and confuse defenders. I kept thinking that if I didn't regain 100% feeling on my foot, I would lose that ability...and then what?

I began to fill my mind with all sorts of negative thoughts, such as, "I might not be the same player ever again. Why did this happen to me? I'm just a few years away from possibly playing professionally. What if I don't make team Canada!"

On top of my injury, my stress was compounded by the fact that the U17 Team Canada tryouts were around the corner, for which I had been one of just a handful of players picked to take part in the selection process. I anxiously started to think that I needed to get back on the field as soon as possible, so consequently, I rushed myself back into playing when my injury was not 100% ready. Not only did I obviously not perform at my best, but I continued to get angry and stressed about the whole situation. I was running out of time to be healthy and ready for the tryouts!

Not having anyone, such as a mental skills coach, to help me with the emotional stress I was experiencing during this injury, I couldn't help but continue with the negative thoughts: "What if my feeling doesn't come back 100% to my foot? All my dreams would be lost! What if I can't play for Team Canada, European scouts won't get to see me play, I'll never get a chance to play in Europe. This can't be happening to me! Why me?"

After a few weeks of playing with my injury and not improving, I finally took a step back and said to myself, "At this rate YOU are not going to make Team Canada, so take some time off and figure out what is wrong and how to get better. I made a choice and took it upon myself to seek more medical advice and not return to the field until I was better."

This was an extremely hard decision at the time, but it was one that benefitted me in the long run. I went to see a few doctors, and after numerous tests I was told that I had some

nerve damage along the side of my right shin, down to my foot. The doctors told me that, when you're talking about nerves, they sometimes return to 100%... but sometimes they just *never do*. They advised that it would be best to not strain the nerves and let the area heal for a few months, then re-evaluate my case.

So, I gave my leg some time to heal, but, in the meantime, I continued to get more and more frustrated. I was gaining weight, was emotionally distraught and I was desperate to get better. I was close to a state of depression when one night, after crying myself to sleep, I decided that I needed to focus on whatever I could do during this time to be a better player, so that when I finally am able to play again, I might not be too far behind. This was one of my first demonstrations of mental strength that I exhibited, and it is one that would pay back tenfold.

First, I began to work on my physical conditioning, which was tough to start but not anything I hadn't done before. Then, I decided that I was going to train my left foot so that if my right foot never completely heals, I can compensate in this way. This was important because there are very few players in soccer that can use both feet efficiently, even at the professional level.

At first, this was extremely difficult. Imagine learning how to throw or write with your weak arm—it's awkward, unnatural, and very uncomfortable. It almost felt like learning to play all over again. I grew quite frustrated as I watched my kicks go all over the place. Then, one day, I decided that I was just going to focus on understanding the movement and feelings of my natural right leg and compare it to my weaker left leg (that way, I would see if I could transfer my skill to my weaker leg). There was no ball, no game—just me, closing my eyes and feeling my way through the motions. In other words, I was going to try to make it feel more natural. I had no idea, but I was starting to use the magical powers of imagery and visualization but to a degree that most never get to.

First, I started with my strong right leg and I tried to feel and understand how it felt and why it felt so natural and then I would do the same thing and swing my left leg with my eyes closed to feel the difference with the idea being to try and transfer that natural movement I felt from one side to the another.

I kept practicing this in my mind repeatedly and slowly my left side began to feel better. I then began to transfer the motion that was happening in my mind by incorporating a ball after a few minutes of imagery. I was still very frustrated, as my accuracy at first was very good but I slowly began improving. At the same time, I couldn't get that picture of Marco Tardelli out of my head, and I was adamant about making Team Canada. I could see this practice helping me move toward that goal.

A few months later, I was retested by the doctors, who confirmed what I was feeling. The nerves were still not at 100% but that I would be able to go back and play, since they didn't feel that I was susceptible to further injury. I asked if there was a chance, I might regain full nerve feeling down the road, and the doctors again told me there's a possibility but that they were not sure. I left the doctor's office that day extremely sad and dismayed at the possibility of not regaining my full feeling on my right leg.

However, the silver lining in this story was that I was able to play again. Every day, I faced the challenge of playing with a foot that had not regained full nerve feeling, but I had the benefit of a more useful left foot, which was stronger than ever. After all this time, I was riding a roller coaster of confidence. From one end I was happy and confident in my ability to use my left leg competently however, there was always fear and doubt about my right leg. My new reality changed my game a bit, but the important part was that I was on the field again. I could once again see my goals within reach!

In April of 1987, I was named to a final roster of 35 players for a training camp for Team Canada, of which 18 were going to be selected. At this camp, I was by far the smallest player. I had grown very little in the last two years and other players were getting bigger, stronger, and faster than me all the time. Of course, this difference also began to play on my mind. I kept thinking, "Why did I stop growing? Why couldn't I be just a little bit bigger? Did my speed diminish because of my leg injury?"

But, on the other side of my mind, I also kept telling myself to focus on my dream, that I wasn't too far away from it, and to keep working on giving my all. I remember having this continuous, inner struggle in my mind and not enjoying the tremendous opportunity I had. After a tough six weeks of training and fighting with myself internally, as well as against other strong talented young athletes, the decision was made, and I was named to the Canadian National Youth team. Finally, one of my dreams had been realized!

I had made Team Canada, and I kept feeling better about using my ever-improving weaker left foot. However, I also understood I wasn't the same player prior to my injury. My right leg would grow numb during a game, and it affected my game to the point where I wasn't able take shots on goal or make long passes the way I used to. This obstacle was always in the back of my mind, and it added self-doubt which contributed to lower confidence. By the way no one knew my situation and what I was going through.

Despite this constant internal struggle, after participating in the FIFA Youth World Cup, at the age of seventeen I signed with the local professional soccer club and thus my professional career began. This is the point in my life when my next, great challenge arose.

The Darkest Days

As I was preparing for my first professional season during an exhibition game against a local select team, I suffered a concussion just before halftime. The problem was that it wasn't diagnosed at the time, so I played the rest of the game. I wasn't myself for the rest of the game and for a big part of the season. I began seeing long stretches of time on the bench, something I had never dealt with before. At the age of seventeen, I once again grew frustrated with my predicament and had very little patience with my situation. I had no mental toughness skills and tools to understand and cope with what was happening and to realize that I needed to be patient, wait for my opportunity, and then take advantage of it. I never knew that most players go through periods of adjustment, time waiting to take advantage of opportunities, and just overall time to grow and develop. Unfortunately, I never received this type of brain training from a coach or mentor.

Once again, distraught with my situation, I decided to travel to South America to pursue my professional career. I took a huge leap of faith and travelled to my country of birth Ecuador. I went to an open tryout for a very popular first division club and I was fortunate enough to get signed after my second training session with what was, at that time, the most successful 1st division team in Ecuador. Again, what started out great quickly turned sour. I had signed for a club that had a pool of twenty first team players and twenty reserve team players. I was constantly fighting for a spot with forty other players. I once again found myself fighting for playing time. Plus, to compound the problem, I was infected with a stomach virus a few months after arriving. I slowly recovered from the virus but only after losing close to 20 pounds. Again, feeling desperate, impatient, not understanding how to cope with adversity, I forced my team to release me, so I could go to another club.

In my second year in South America and still only nineteen, I found myself constantly fighting for playing time. I had now spent close to three years struggling with injuries and not playing much during a time when it was most critical that a young player develop his skills. My patience was wearing thin. I was thinking that maybe I might not make it after all? And what would that mean to me and my future? Once again, I was battling with self-doubt, a lack of confidence, and no plan to focus on moving forward. My emotions were all over the place, my right foot hadn't completely healed, and I had no hope that it would ever be 100% again.

At that point, I thought to myself, “Really, God, how could this be? How could I come so close to my dream? How could you give me all this talent only to take it away from me?!” I took a deep breath and said to myself, “I need to get back to North America finish my education, then see what happens.”

During that second season in Ecuador, I returned home crushed and defeated. In my mind, my dreams had vanished. I had no idea as to what I was going to do with my life or how people would see me. All these thoughts and feelings took me to a state of depression that I will never forget. In my darkest days, I would never get out of bed, I would take medication for severe headaches, and I would struggle with my mind as it tried to make sense of my lot in life. Struggling with my thoughts started to become a daily occurrence.

One day, I decided I needed to dig deep and reset myself, so I became proactive with my physical and mental health. These baby steps allowed me to move forward slowly. My first decision was to return to school, and I eventually sent out inquiries to a few US/Canadian universities and colleges in hopes of an athletic scholarship.

After months of waiting, I received two offers: one from an American university and the other from a college in Canada. It was the first, full athletic scholarship this Canadian school had offered anyone. I thought about my hopeful soccer career again and chose to stay in Canada, as it would take me only three years to complete my studies, compared to four years in the United States. In my mind, this decision would allow me to try my luck with professional soccer once again.

I spent three very successful years at college, during which we won two indoor championships where I was voted the Most Valuable Player on both occasions. I felt a sense of pride in leaving a legacy of commitment and accomplishment at the school. At one of my college games, a scout for one of the teams in the Canadian Professional Soccer League (CPSL) had seen me and asked that I go tryout. I went and signed (with what would turn out to be a seven-year stint and my last pro team).

Having gone through a lot, I thought the worst must be over, but I was wrong. In my first year at the club, I again had to go through a lack of playing time, although I was better prepared to handle it this time. I was much more patient, I was a better teammate throughout and overall handled it better, but it was still difficult. After my first season, I won a starting spot on the team, and for the next three years, things were great again. I was playing a lot, making some money doing something I liked, and I had gotten married and began to coach youth soccer.

In my fifth year, I received another concussion. And, although I made sure to ease back into playing safely and slowly, I knew that I was not the same player after my second traumatic brain injury. Two years later, I sustained another concussion, my third that I knew of. One day while at home recovering, I remember looking at my daughter that was two at the time and my son who was just born and I made the decision to retire from the sport I loved, the thing that I felt I was born to do and the only thing I thought I was good at!

I was only 29 years old, a point where many soccer players reach their full athletic potential, and yet I was retiring. This sent me into an identity crisis and my second depressive episode. You see, I always thought I would retire in my mid-to-late thirties with a comfortable bank account and a well-known reputation, which would essentially allow me to not have to worry about opportunities for the rest of my life. However, this was not the case.

Brain Training

During this time, with a wife and two young children to take care of, I took it upon myself to do everything I could to recover and reset my life. I would go to the library almost every day and read as much as I could regarding self-help, motivation, and especially on the brain (psychology). As I started reading more and more, I not only started understanding the power of the mind, but I also started realizing how my thoughts had negatively affected my life and my career. I began to understand that my thoughts had affected my feelings in so many ways, which in turn affected my play (many times not for the best).

What I didn't realize at the time was that my biggest competition was myself, and more specifically, my thoughts. All the thoughts that swirl in the mind of a young athlete have a direct effect on outward behavior and results. Although I did exhibit mental toughness at times, I more often than not exhibited mental *weakness*, which was detrimental to my development. This correlation was fascinating to me, so I dove even deeper into brain training and learned much more about sports psychology, high-performance principals, and mental skills and strategies. The more knowledge I gained on the subject the more I kept asking myself, "*Why didn't anyone teach me this?!*"

You see, these principles are KEY to performance, much more than all the physical, technical, and tactical training I have ever done. I kept thinking, "Why aren't coaches trained to teach this?!" Consequently, as I began my coaching career, I made it a point to not only

teach the X's and O's but to train, what most coaches acknowledge as being most important: developing the power of a young athlete's mind.

Since then, I have been lucky enough to train hundreds if not thousands of athletes at all levels and all walks of life. From those starting their athletic careers to professional athletes and others that have gone on to succeed at World Championships and Olympic Games.

Now, as I look back at my experience, I feel it has trained me to have an empathic heart whenever I work with a young athlete. Through their eyes, I clearly see myself at their age, with those grandiose hopes and dreams. I foresee the hurdles that will come their way, which I happily prepare them to face and overcome.

My wish is for every athlete to become mentally-tough so they are prepared to overcome all the roadblocks that will come their way; that they will be emotionally stable enough to handle any and all situations and ultimately reach their full athletic potential and enjoy their journey along the way. As a parent of young athletes, myself, I know how much parents want to support their child and help them pursue their athletic dream. My goal is to help everyone prepare mentally to achieve their dreams, while also making sure they grow and develop strong life-skills that will help on and off the athletic arena.

I believe that no athlete could reach the heights they dream of on their own. Everyone needs a supporting cast, a sport-specific coach, a physical fitness coach, and most importantly *every high-performance young athlete needs a mental skills coach!*

Sooner or later, all young athletes will face challenges that, depending on how they handle it, will ultimately change the course of their athletic career. The question is will it change for the better or for the worse? This book prepares them to face these challenges. It also helps athletes develop strong and deep self-esteem that's used as a springboard to help them put their best foot forward to pursue their underlying burning desire to succeed.

In the next chapter, I will combine my personal experience as a former athlete, coach, and parent with my certification in mental-skills training to present you with my easy-to-follow program, Mental Toughness Coaching (MTC). My program has helped thousands of young athletes in their athletic journey, and now I'm ready to equip you with the same principles, tools, and resources I gave them so they could reach their full potential.

Chapter 3: Mental Toughness Coach

“For tomorrow belongs to those that plan for it today”

— *African Proverb*

MTC

As mentioned, this book is going to be the catalyst to spearhead any athlete’s athletic development. By keeping a bullseye focus on the activities that are going to return the best results for them, they can move forward with confidence, regardless of the situation and/or circumstances before them. Essentially, I will become the athlete’s tutor, mentor and mental-toughness coach.

Once an athlete learns the mental-skills tools that will help them to become mentally tough, he/she will have a super-power to their disposal. It’s like having a magic wand that they can wave to turn stressful or trying situations into powerful, learning experiences that will allow them to maximize their development. As you read this book, you probably will begin to tell yourself, “Oh, how I wish someone taught me this when I was younger! How different things could be for me right now!” Or maybe you’re one of the lucky ones. You’re young, willing and able to learn this all-important superpower! If this is your case, you’re in an enviable position.

Regardless of what stage you are in your athletic life, the goal is about helping you maximizing your potential. In my case, I reached many of my goals, and I accomplished many things that most people would say were great and should be very proud of. In truth, they are correct, but in the back of my mind, there’s always the thought that if I had received this type of ‘mental toughness coaching’ when I was young, I undoubtedly would have achieved a lot more.

The goal with this book is to make sure any athlete never has this doubt or thought in the back of their mind. I want to make sure that, with my help, you (athlete/parent/coach) will have the support, knowledge, and tools needed to achieve any and all athletic dreams. I am going to take you through my exclusive, Mental Toughness Coaching (MTC) program.

At the end of this book, you will have a ‘Mental Toughness Toolkit’ that you can draw from, refer to, and use on a regular basis to overcome hurdles and (more importantly) flourish in the athletic arena. It will be one of the most important educational materials any athlete will ever own. So, having said that, this is how the book is going to work: the step-by-step guide is broken down into 3 sections.

Section 1: The Buy In

Section 1 is what I call the “Buy In.” There is no hiding the fact that there is some work to be done. Although I refer to the power of mental toughness coaching like waving a magic wand, we both know that an athlete can’t wave that magic wand unless they have trained first and have a clear grasp of the necessary concept and tools.

In order for any athlete to put in the time and work required for proficiency, they must be completely convinced that the work is going to pay off. For instance, it’s easy to understand that if you go to the gym and do weight training, you will get stronger, faster, and more agile. Not only is this a universal understanding of biological physics, but as athletes, we quickly feel stronger and see our muscles grow as our training becomes consistent. Even better, we see the incredible physiques of some athletes. Physical strength is very tangible, you can see and feel it. Therefore, it is easy to conclude that the more you train, the better of an athlete you will be. Mental toughness is not so clear-cut.

Can we really tell when an athlete is mentally tough? Sometimes, it’s more apparent than others. Body language and performance, for example, often indicate a strong, mental foundation or lack thereof. But what does brain training look like? How do we know it works? How will an athlete know it is working? These are the questions that will be covered during Section 1 of the book. You will be provided with evidence regarding the power of the brain and, more importantly, the power of the brain in relation to achieving excellence in athletic performance.

Scientifically based information will hopefully get you to buy into the power of what you will be learning. I call this part the Mental Toughness Foundations. We will talk about:

- The importance of mental toughness for young athletes and the power this can convey to their success.
- The 3 Pillars of Success, which are derived from years of scientific study on elite athletes from around the world.
- How our brain, in its natural state, actually works against us not for us in sports!

Section Two: Mind’s Connection to Performance

Then, I get into what can be quite simply described as the most important part of the book. When I do my presentations, I tell all the athletes that if they remember only one thing about my workshop, it needs to be this one and that is understanding the, “mind’s connection to how they ultimately perform.” In this section, I describe how the mind works in relation to

emotions and ultimately performance and I begin to explain how they can change/train their own mind.

This is key because when an athlete understands this concept, he/she understands:

- A) The power of their thinking.
- B) How they can use it to their benefit.
- C) What they need to do to harness this power (the work involved).

Once this concept is understood and the athlete believes in the steps, the magic begins to happen. That is, the athlete will begin to put the work in to become mentally tough.

In this section, I will also touch on the importance of a support system in each athlete's journey to success. This is key, because I will clearly explain how any great achievement by any individual in athletics or life was never done on their own—there was always help, support, and/or coaches along the journey. Again, this is so important because it will open the door for athletes to welcome the proper support.

Section 3: Mental Toughness Tools

The next part of the book is where everything starts coming together; where, “the rubber meets the road,” so to speak. We will dive into what I call, “Mental Toughness Tools.” I will go over six mental skills tools that will build on each other. After each tool, there will be an activity to train this tool, as well as homework. The purpose of homework is so athletes can get continuously comfortable with the tool and have a clear understanding of how and when to use it.

Throughout this section and other parts of the book, I will refer to different online reference material you will need to access so please be ready with your phone, computer or tablet so you can easily access these sources. Essentially, I will guide you through a combination of short videos (usually on YouTube) and some activities.

At the end of this part of the book, an athlete by combining all the assignments, will have a Mental Toughness Toolkit, that they can refer to as needed. That is, they will (should) have a binder full of material which they can use to keep themselves strong, brave, confident, and focused throughout their athletic journey.

Ok, before we start, athletes need a three-hole binder, with lined paper, a pencil, eraser, and highlighter. I hope you are as excited as I am to get this training started. Without further ado, let's get started.

Chapter 4: Mental Toughness Foundations

“There is no elevator to success, you have to take the stairs.”

— *Anonymous*

Your Brain Has Only One Job

In order to get the necessary commitment from the athlete for this training, it's important we provide quality, scientifically backed evidence that supports mental toughness training as a worthwhile endeavour. In this chapter, my goal is to provide evidence in support of mental toughness. After reading the chapter, a parent can relay the information to their child, or, depending on the child's age, you can hand them the book and have them read it themselves.

What is Mental Toughness? We all sort of understand what *mental toughness* means, but if I were to ask you for a definition of mental toughness, what would you say? When I ask my athletes, I get everything from complete silence to a wide variety of answers as you can imagine. The best way I've found that profoundly explains what mental toughness is is by watching a video called [‘The Death Crawl’ on YouTube](#). It is a scene from the movie *Facing the Giants* and depicts the young football player Brock being called out by his coach to do the death crawl. Before he starts, Brock asks his coach, “Coach where do you want me to get to the 30 (yard line)?”

His coach answers, “I want you to get to the 50 (yard line),” and quickly proceeds to blindfold him.

Brock promptly giggles at his coach's suggestion, believing that he could possibly get to the 50-yard line *without* anyone on his back. His coach tells him that he wants him to do it with his teammate (Jeremy) on his back, but no matter where he gets to, he wants him to give his very best effort. The coach makes it very clear that he wants nothing but the best effort, and Brock agrees.

Well, if you watch the video you know how it ends—with Brock making it all the way to the end zone (that's 100 yards of death crawling, more than 3 times farther than Brock imagined he could accomplish). So, the question is: what got Brock to the end zone rather than the 30 that he thought he could do or the 50 yards that his coach suggested?

When I ask this question at my workshops, many people guess, “the coach.” Which is, in part, true. The coach did a great job inspiring Brock to not give up and pushing him through. Any great achievement (by any person) is not done alone, and I will talk more about this later in the book. However, at the end of the day, the coach could have yelled all he wanted, and Brock could have said, “Sorry coach, this is as far as I go,” and he could have dropped to the ground. However, Brock kept pushing through, he had committed to give it his all, so he kept going.

During his death crawl, Brock told his coach on several occasions that his arms were burning, that it hurt, that he is running out of strength, and that he couldn’t continue. However, he continued to persevere until he literally had no strength to keep going and he dropped to the ground, after giving it his all.

I tell my young athletes that the biggest factor that took Brock to the end zone was his mental toughness. His mind kept pushing him through the pain and agony that he was transmitting. He remembered his promise to give it his all, and that’s what he did. That is why I like to define *Mental Toughness* as: *The ability to keep moving forward when circumstances are difficult*. This definition is important because every young, high-performing athlete will sooner or later run into difficult situations. Whether that situation is an injury, a poor run of play, a coach who is consistently on their back, or teammates who they’re not getting along with, a young athlete will be confronted with hurdles that threaten their trajectory. Unless the athlete knows how to deal with these situations, so as to keep moving forward, it can and *will* take a toll on performance.

I can’t stress enough the importance of this reality. As a young talented athlete, I rarely tasted much on-field adversity. Being the captain of almost every team I played on and the team member who delivered when it mattered, my athletic career seemed to be going great until my first major injury at the age of 15. I had never previously experienced what it felt like to not be able to play for a long period of time, nor did I have the patience to endure my rehabilitation. Thus, I forced myself back to play too early and re-injured myself.

No one ever told me I would run up against tough moments. No one told me that facing hurdles is part of the process, that it’s ok to be patient and make sure I heal completely. Mental toughness is as much about patience during the hard times as it is about giving it your all while working through the tough moments.

Just as young athletes train their body for competition, they must do the same with their brains. Neuroscience tells us that the brain can be trained just like a muscle: it grows in capacity

as we train it. Neuroreceptors keep firing away as we learn and experience new things, not only are new connections made but these connections are made stronger (just like a rope) as we continue to practice, so we just need to understand how to maximize and harness this amazing power.

As you have probably imagined a huge added benefit from my mental-toughness program is that all the principals are transferable to all walks of life. The same mental toughness tools can be used to maximize academic performance, to incorporate onto the stage in the area of performance arts or something as every-day as a social setting (especially for young people who are shy like me)!

If we break down all the scientific information regarding our brain and all the countless actions it does, it literally comes down to the fact that our brain has one job to do. That's it, just *one* job! Take a wild guess of what you think it is?

Again, when I ask my athletes, I can get everything from, "Keep you moving and keep your heart pumping," to a dumbfounded look that says, "Only one thing, really?"

Ultimately, all the functions your brain does for you is to ***keep you alive!*** Your brain is constantly making choices for you for this very purpose. Now, the reason why understanding this is so important is because 97% of the choices we make daily are subconscious; that is, our brain is making these decisions for us *automatically*, without us knowingly going through a thinking process.

Let me explain further, no one that has the capability of walking actually stops and thinks about getting our legs to move and walk this happens automatically. Same with our lungs taking and releasing air or our heart taking in and releasing blood. No one wakes up and thinks "I hope my lungs and heart are going to work today!"

These are all automatic decisions our brain makes for us to keep us alive. Now that we know this, what does this have to do with athletic performance? Well, this is how it works.

Your brain makes automatic (subconscious) decisions for you based on the fact that it wants to keep you calm, relax, happy, stress free because this to the brain is being alive. Now how often are athletes in a calm, relax, happy and stress-free situation? When I ask this question, I get two answers – Never or Hardly Ever! And that's 100% true as an athlete we are always in stressful, pressure packed and often chaotic environments and your brain doesn't want you there!

Therefore, in its natural state your brain *is not* in partnership to help you achieve what you want in the athletic arena. Let me say this again because this is crucial...in its natural state

your brain *is not* in partnership to help you achieve what you want in the athletic arena. When I first learned about this it was an eye-opening revelation.

Because of this conflict it is imperative that athletes **MUST**, I repeat **MUST** train their brain so that it works for them not against them when they are performing.

Now, when you take into consideration that we have between 50-80 thousand thoughts a day, it's clear that we need to understand and ultimately train our brains, so that our automatic (subconscious) decisions the brain is making for us is actually helping us towards our goal and not hindering us.

The way I explain it to my athletes that seems to simplify the process is this: consider your brain as a huge library, and every time you have an experience (do something), your brain categorizes it. It associates an emotion to that experience and says it's either a great, good, ok, bad, or terrible experience. Then, it puts that book (memory) into that specific category inside your brain's library. Now, the next time you find yourself in a similar situation, your brain quickly acts as a librarian and goes to find that book to remember how the story ends, how you felt. If the result was bad or terrible, it's going to subconsciously make the decision for you to avoid that place because it wants to protect you. Your brain is trying to take you out of a dangerous or uncomfortable situation.

The problem is high-performing athletes don't have the option of deciding not to go back on the ice in overtime because last time they lost the puck and the other team scored the game winning goal. So, what young athletes need to do is learn how to train their brain so that, when it's writing the conclusion of every book (storing that memory), it's also moving the needle from a terrible ending to a great ending before it's stored for future use by the subconscious mind.

If an athlete can't learn to train their brain's reactionary storage system, their brain will make sure that every bad experience is played out in their subconscious mind. When the brain is trying to protect the athlete, it says, "Don't go there", or "It didn't finish well last time. Remember that you were embarrassed, sad, extremely upset." Therefore, it begins to close (shut down) to the environment, and then the athlete doesn't have quick access to all the resources they need to succeed.

Worst case scenario, even though an athlete is technically ready with all the skills they've been training and physically ready because of all the hard work they've put in the gym, eventually they will succumb to worst-case scenario and/or negative thinking. They won't be able to control their nerves or keep their focus and confidence level high, which can often lead to an emotional breakdown. The end results are not good.

Best case scenario, an athlete still performs well and may even succeed however he/she will not perform to their full potential and this is what all athletes strive for. They strive to play at their absolute best when it matters most. However, it's impossible to do this unless you regularly train your skills, body and MIND!

When an athlete trains their mind they know how to finish the book (memory) of every experience positively, so that the next time they find themselves in a similar situation, the brain sees this experience as an opportunity to overcome, develop, and learn. It will give the young athlete access to all the resources they need to face the challenge dead-on with courage, confidence, and extreme focus = this is resiliency. These characteristics will give any athlete the best opportunity to succeed and play to their full potential on a regular basis.

This change in mentality is what makes an athlete – mentally tough – and makes all the difference in the world. Brain training is so powerful, which is why I say it's like waving a magic wand. This is what my MTC program does for any athlete.

The Three Pillars of Success

Over the years, much scientific research has been done on individuals who reach the highest levels of their discipline. One of the most interesting pieces of information that I've come across is what is called the Three Pillars of Success. This model is based off research that has been reduced to the three most important factors to determining why an individual athlete reaches extremely high levels of performance. I like to point this out to my young athletes because many of them have a misconception of what will take them to the top, and because of this misconception, they're making decisions that will not directly benefit their athletic potential.

The First Pillar of Success: Nature

Nature—it's what we are born with. It's the genes that make us who we are. In athletics, we call it *natural talent*. This is easy to recognize, especially at the younger ages, but what may be surprising is that it's not nearly the most important factor in making it to the top. In fact, there are hundreds of examples of young, talented athletes who, for whatever reason, never made it to the top of their profession. You just have to read the stories about young star athletes like Marcus Dupree, Freddy Adu, Ryan Leaf, and Kara Lang as proof.

There is a misconception that talent is key to reaching a certain level. Now yes, it's one of the pillars of success, so there has to be a certain level of natural talent. However, if you want to be a world-class athlete in any sport, you need more than just natural talent alone.

In 2018 the University of Catania, Italy did a study on 'Luck vs Talent' and this was their conclusion:

“Success at times can have nothing to do with innate ability (talent). Although some degree of talent is necessary to be successful (in any field) almost never do the most talented people reach the highest peaks of success, being overtaken by mediocre (less talented) but sensible (mentally strong) and luckier individuals.”

The Second Pillar of Success: Nurture

Nurture refers to the environment we are brought up in, as well as how we are brought up in that space. I'll give you my example: I was a young soccer player growing up in Canada in the mid-1980s. So, how did my environment support my dream of being a professional soccer player?

I could argue that it wasn't great; that the coaching wasn't at the standard I needed; that the professional opportunities were definitely more limited than if I would have grown up in a country in Europe or South America, where soccer is the main sport and where there are hundreds of professional teams of which I could have joined. However, having said that, there were dozens of worse places around the world to grow up in for soccer, places which would have hampered my development. At the end of the day, it's a factor but not the biggest factor.

The Third Pillar of Success: Ourselves

The most important factor in reaching one's full potential is, by far, *ourselves*! That's right...we can look for all the excuses out there, but it really comes down to each and everyone one of us to decide that we are going to put our best effort to making our dream a reality. Like the coach said to Brock, “Promise me you will give me your best!” The problem is almost all athletes and most parents don't know what they're missing. In other words, almost all athletes say and think they are giving it their best but are they really? (We'll look into this in more detail in another chapter) In a lot of cases they don't know what they don't know. Giving it your best would be getting the right training with the right person or organization and then putting in the work in skillset, physical readiness *and mental toughness*.

This is why, I commend you parent/coach/athlete for taking the step of acquiring this book and your commitment to athletic development. However, at the end of the day it has to be up to each individual athlete to put in the work so that this book benefits them to the extent that it has already helped so many others succeed.

I'll give you an example: my son was an athletic boy growing up. He was good in most sports but was particularly talented as a hockey goalie. Once he learned how to skate, he quickly made it up the ranks to play at the highest level, in a league that is widely recognized as the best league in the world for young, aspiring hockey players, the Greater Toronto Hockey League (GTHL). All his goalie coaches told him he was talented, and he had the potential to go far if he chose to. I also noticed this but didn't really push him. At some point, I asked him, "Elias, how far do you want to take hockey? What is your goal and dream?"

That's when he told me, "Dad, I like to play hockey, but my goal is not to play in the NHL or even get a scholarship, I just like to play."

This made perfect sense to me because I never saw him dive particularly deep into watching games, studying other goalies, doing off-ice training, and all the little extras that are needed to get to the next level. There was nothing wrong with his lack of interest because, at the end of the day, professional hockey just wasn't his goal. So, talent and opportunity are nice, but the decision from each individual person to work to their highest capacity is paramount in reaching their goal and ultimately fulfilling their potential.

Having said that, there is even more to this pillar than meets the eye. Within the third Pillar of Success, what these high-performance athletes also said was that they noticed as they climbed the developmental mountain, they found that the level of talent started to level off. All competitors at the highest levels were extremely talented and the difference was negligible. They also notice that training methods for strength and conditioning and nutrition planning were very similar.

However, what they noticed what really set them apart was their decision making process when the pressure was on, when fans were chanting for or against, when the cameras were on and pressure and chaos reigned they noticed they were able to focus and be confident in the decisions that they were making and in particular more so than their counterparts.

These athletes said that as they developed, their mental toughness was the #1 determining factor for why they were able to reach the pinnacle of their sport. Any athlete that

is not training their brain (mental toughness) as seriously as they train their body and their sport-specific skill set is leaving a lot of potential on the table.

I like to give my young athletes this example: I take out a deck of cards and tell them we are going to play a card-game called War. Most know how to play this game, but in case you don't, all you need to know is that two players get distributed an equal number of cards. Each player then throws down a card, and the higher card wins the battle. Hence, the player with the higher card takes both cards to his pile. The object of the game is to win all the cards, thereby winning the war.

When I start the game, I divide the pile of cards into 3 sections one for my athlete, one for me and the other I put on the side and I tell my athlete those are extra cards and that if they want, they can grab them but they don't have to. What do you think happens? 95% of them end up taking the cards. Of course, they do! They have just increased their chances of winning the game tenfold. The more cards they have, the more likely they will have higher ranking cards. Therefore, they will likely win more battles and increase their chances to win the whole game. Essentially, they have gained an edge over me (their opponent) by stacking the deck in their favor.

In this day and age so many athletes spend a lot of time and money to get extra coaching on their skills (shooting, dribbling, catching, hitting, defending etc.) and on their physical preparedness (agility, power, strength, balance etc.) and there's nothing wrong with that except for the fact that everyone else is doing it too!

Less than 1% of athletes regularly train their brain to compete. Do you want an edge over your competition? Everyone does! So, the answer is train your brain. This exponentially increase an athlete's chances at success, at reaching their dreams, but only if they take the cards that represent mental toughness training seriously!

So, why would you leave any cards on the table? Why would you leave anything to chance when it comes to your life and the career ambitions? Stack the deck in your favor as much as you can and get to work by giving me all you got.

The truth is even after giving them this example, just a small percentage end up taking their brain training seriously. This is why the small percentage of athletes that do take it seriously have a huge competitive advantage over their competition.

If it were me, knowing what I know now, I would say that mental training should be just as important as any other area of your training, if not more. That's because no matter how

hard an athlete trains physically, no matter how good they take care of their nutrition, no matter how hard they work at their sport...if they're not in the right frame of mind to make good, quick decisions when under the pressure, everything falls apart.

Young athletes need mental toughness for:

- Improved focus and concentration
- Consistent confident play
- Sustained motivation
- Development of a healthy belief system that produces self-esteem
- Ability to bounce back from adversity
- Development of coping skills to deal with setbacks
- Track and measure performance
- Injury management
- To be disciplined with their commitment and level of work rate
- Continuously overcoming barriers along the journey.

I can assure you that 95% of the competition is not serious about their mind in relation to their success. Most high-level athletes understand and realize it's important but very few go out there and do something about it. This is a great way to have a competitive advantage. If as an athlete your innermost desire is truly to succeed at your chosen sport, then why would you leave anything to chance? Don't leave any stone unturned in the training arena.

The truth is 'thinking-patterns' take hard work and time to change, which is why only a select few commit to the training and truly become mentally tough athletes and build a competitive advantage over everyone else.

In conclusion, talent is over-rated. Sure, it's nice to have, and at the younger ages it's easily noticeable. But, as the athlete ages, all those intrinsic virtues such as grit and determination become more important than natural talent. That is why any serious athlete needs to train their brain—because this is where the magic begins to happen.

By the way, it's worth noting that (in the Three Pillars of Success) many successful athletes attribute some of their success to a bit of luck. But for this to happen, you need to put in the work. Nothing is free, nothing happens overnight, and luck doesn't just knock on your door if you're not doing anything. It doesn't just find you when you're playing video games instead of training. Luck comes from preparing the right way and being in the right spot at the right time, so you can take advantage of the opportunity.

There are countless stories in which scouts watch a player and another player just happens to catch their eye. Before you know it, it's this other player that is ultimately pursued by the scout. All athletes need to be ready to take advantage of opportunity because if they prepare the right way, sooner or later an opportunity will come knocking.

Mind + Emotion = Performance

During my workshops, I tell all my athletes that if this next section of my presentation is all they remember for the day, then I'm a happy guy. That's because I believe that understanding the, mind + emotion = performance formula, is the basis for all the mental toughness training and tools I teach in my MTC program. This concept is the foundation for everything that follows. It teaches athletes how to – change the ending of each experience.

Everything starts with a *thought*. This thought produces a *feeling*, which then is the impetus for our *actions*. Now, this is very important to an athlete because athletes know exactly how they are feeling at any given moment in time. They are feeling nervous before a game, they are happy they scored a goal, they are sad because they lost a game, they're frustrated because they lost to their rival, they're angry because the coach yelled at them, or perhaps they're ecstatic because someone gave them a compliment.

What most athletes don't know is that their feelings first start as a thought. For example, most athletes feel nervous while driving on the way to a competition. Now, nerves in general aren't bad (I'll talk more about this in a later chapter) but it's important for a young athlete to start asking, "Why am I nervous?" Once they begin to dig, most will see that they are nervous because they are thinking about making mistakes, or they are afraid to let the team down. Something in and around a negative connotation. These thoughts, if not corrected will cause the brain to close down because it doesn't want you to go there (remember, your brain is trying to protect you it wants you calm and happy). This mental shutdown will likely lead to actions that include second guessing, doubt and no quick and clear decision-making process, all of which is not ideal for peak athletic performance.

What an athlete needs to learn is how to stop himself/herself when they notice a negative feeling or a feeling that is not conducive to a positive performance. Athlete's need to be more in tune to their thoughts on a regular basis. That is, athletes need to ask themselves what are they thinking about that has them feeling this way. Easier said than done, yes, I know.

If we go back to our example, since this athlete (we'll call him, Frank) is taking my mental toughness course program, Frank feels quite nervous going to his game, but he understands that he needs to stop and think about his thoughts. When doing so Frank realizes he is thinking of doom and gloom situations (recent mistakes, past experiences against his next opponent etc.), but now he begins to discipline himself. Frank begins to change his thinking pattern. So, instead of thinking of the mistakes, he takes a step back and begins to change his thoughts into:

- I've actually been performing really well the last few games/competitions!
- I've also been practicing extremely well!
- Even if I don't succeed, I will learn a lot from competing at this level (we'll talk more about this in the next chapter).
- Making the play that wins the game/competition

Frank starts to change his thinking patterns that directly affect how he feels. By doing this his feeling of anxiousness and impending doom on the athletic arena starts to become a feeling of excitement which then leads to the all-powerful emotional status that all athletes want to play with and that's...**confidence**. When the brain identifies excitement and confidence it starts to open up and it says "I like this. Yes, lets go and do this!" Now you have access to all the resources you need to make quick, clear confident decisions.

Now your brain is in partnership with you to help you get what you want in the athletic arena. Now an athlete goes to their competition technically, physically and mentally ready and has the opportunity to play at their best. This is the beginning of how anyone becomes a mentally tough athlete and can reach their full potential.

I work with a professional young hockey player just one stop shy of the NHL and when I taught him this theory and practical application he was excited by the prospect of adding this to his training. A few weeks after introducing this topic this young man says to me, "Gad, I want to tell you something." "What is it?" I said. He goes on to tell me that he has gotten into to the habit of when he is stopped at a red light he no longer checks his phone or changes the radio station but he begins to think about what's are his thoughts so he could change them if needed, especially if he's going to a game or practice. He also, told me when waiting at a grocery store to pay, he no longer stares at the magazines or chocolate bars but begins to focus on his thinking so he can adjust it if needed. This is how you can make this lesson very applicable to everyday life.

As I mentioned before, changing the thought process or thoughts to something positive is akin to changing the ending of the book (memory) in the brain so that the brain begins to send the signal of positive emotion. Positive emotion feedback causes your brain to open up because it wants you to be happy, this will slowly lead to more confidence and encourage actions that will be more productive, such as making quicker, sharper, and better decisions.

This is the Mind + Emotions = Performance formula. By changing our thoughts, we change our emotions that then lead the body to productive physical performance.

At the end of this lesson, I ask my athletes the question, “By doing all this, does it guarantee you will succeed?”

Most answer no, which is exactly right. Doing everything right in preparation doesn't guarantee success (more on this later in the book), but it does give you the best opportunity to succeed and performance at your best at the end of the day this is all an athlete can do!

I finish this part of my workshop by asking “When you came to see me today who the most important person in the car was?”

You guessed it, most give me the right answer: “my mom”, “my dad,” or the person driving the car, and they quickly understand why. That's because the driver had control of the car. Mom or dad knew where and when to turn, when to stop, and when to go depending on the traffic light. The driver knew everything that was needed to get them to my workshop safely and on time! Your body is the vehicle with many parts, the most important part is the brain. Your brain drives your body, it's just a question of whether it's sending signals to help or hinder your performance. This is what you must learn to control.

Chapter 5 – Four Keys to Thinking Like a Champion

*“Once your mindset changes,
Everything on the outside will change along with it”*
— Steve Maraboli

Power of the Mind

Now that you’re familiar with the basics of why mental toughness is so important to high performance, we’re going to take the next step, which is to begin to train our minds. Or, more specifically, the next step is to help you to train your mind or your athlete’s mind. The goal here is to begin to help athletes develop what I call *success thinking patterns*. That is, develop positive, constructive, automatic (subconscious) thinking patterns, your mind can turn to when making all those automatic decisions for you. It’s the development of a winning way of thinking. I like to refer to it as – thinking like a champion! That’s because champions are different, they think and act different than most and that’s what gets them to the top.

This way of thinking will not only help any athlete cope better with pressure and stress, but it will also help them make better decisions. Ultimately, this pattern of thinking will help your child develop strong habits and give themselves the best opportunity to be successful, which, at the end of the day, is all that an athlete can do. In athletics, there are a lot of variables that are out of an athlete's control. So, your child has to evaluate which variables they can control and go all-in in terms of focusing and mastering them.

Key #1: Embrace Failure

When I teach this lesson to a group of athletes or a team, I initially don’t tell them what Key #1 is; instead, what I do is ask for four “brave volunteers.” I do preface this part by stating that what I’m about to do might make some of you uncomfortable. Most often, I’ll get two athletes that quickly raise their hand, followed by a 3rd and 4th athlete, who reluctantly volunteer themselves. More than half of any group I work with don’t dare raise their hand, and some even don’t dare make eye contact with me.

Once I have my four volunteers, I go into what I call the Rock/Paper/Scissors world championship semi-finals. I break up my volunteers into two groups of two and I have each

pair face off in a game of rock/paper/scissors, and the first player to win twice is declared the victor. Once we have the two winners, I then have them both face off against each other for the grand finale. Again, best out of three until we have ourselves our winner. I promptly provide the winner with a small prize (either some all-natural gum or mints), and it's always a small, healthy prize.

When the winner returns to their seat, I then ask those who didn't volunteer what kept them from raising their hands? What stopped them from taking a chance? You can guess that most don't say anything, while others quietly tell me that they were nervous about what I was going to make them do.

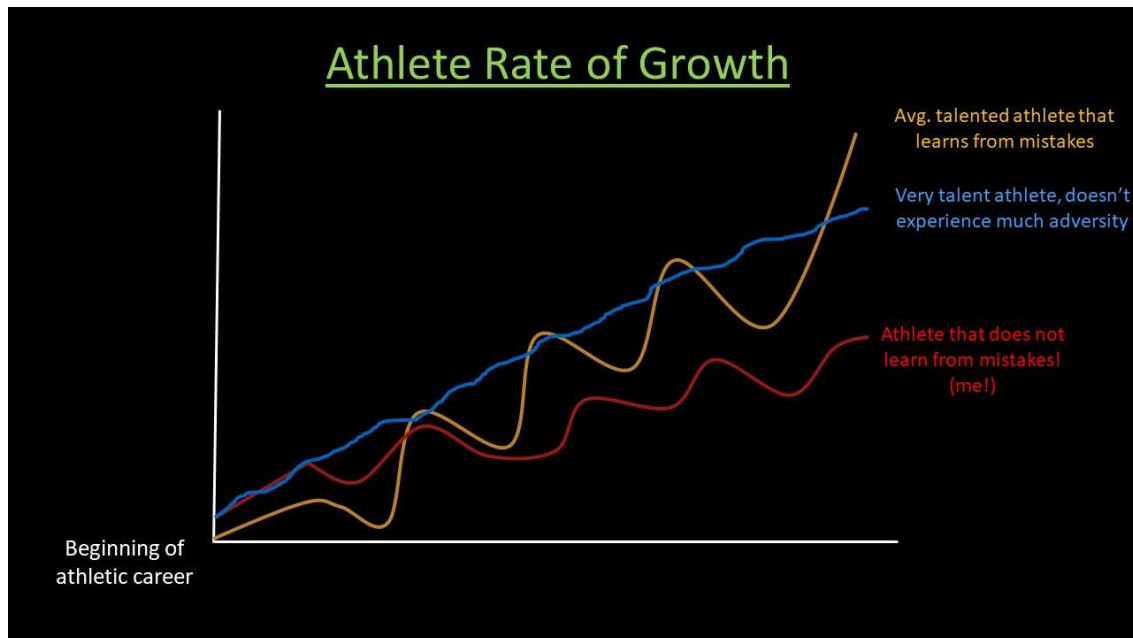
This is when I tell them: that, when I was growing up, I was just like them. I was shy, nervous, and I never wanted to volunteer for anything out of fear that I might make a fool of myself. Which then leads me to announce that Key #1 is Embrace Failure.

I tell my athletes that, although today's prize was just a pack of all-natural gum, tomorrow's prize could be something much bigger than that. If you don't put yourself out there and understand that it's much better to try and fail then it is to never try at all, you may leave many opportunities for yourself unclaimed.

Most young athletes don't realize that it's OK to fail when they're young because that's when you want to make the mistakes. You learn more from your failures than you do from your success. The reason for this is simple. When things are going smoothly a young athlete keeps doing what he/she is doing, because in their view, why should they change? However, those athletes that are failing and have the discipline to ask themselves, "What went wrong? Why did it go wrong? What can I do to make it better?" activate a powerful formula.

When athletes are able to activate a mental formula that lends to their full potential, we call that "maximizing their *Rate of Growth (ROG)*." ROG is important because it allows an athlete to work toward the best possible version of themselves. With time, these athletes will leapfrog other athletes who are complacent, don't adjust their training or, worse yet, don't learn from their mistakes.

How I wish someone would've told me this when I was younger! I struggled internally every time I made a mistake on the field, with thoughts of, "What's wrong with me? Am I losing it? Am I not as good as I use to be?" Or, if my team lost, I would blame myself because I was the player that was depended on the most for a favorable outcome. I missed so many developmental opportunities because I never knew it was OK to fail, to take the time to analyze what happened, and to fix the situation so that next time I could do things differently with the goal of a better outcome. This would have accelerated my ROG,



instead by leaving things the way they were or by dwelling on them and feeling guilty, I had finished this book of my experience with an awful ending. So, the next time I found myself in a similar situation, my brain would remind me of that bad experience and not want me to go there. It closed on me, tried to protect me and didn't allow me access to the resources that I needed to succeed. I was essentially preparing myself for repeated failure under the same situation and definitely not maximizing my rate of growth.

I still remember it like it was yesterday. I was 14 years old, and I missed my very first open net. Now, missing an open net in soccer is not like missing an open net in most sports. A soccer net is huge! My teammate made a nice pass along the face of the net, and I was literally about six yards in front, and as the ball came across, I somehow miss-kicked it and the ball sailed over the net. Not only was I in total shock but so was everybody else watching. Some of my teammates even chuckled at me in a way that said, "I can't believe you just missed."

I didn't think it was funny, and all those negative thoughts and feelings came rushing through my mind. Again, no one ever told me it's OK to make mistakes. Instead, I kept thinking and dwelling on it and it left a pretty bad book in the library of my subconscious brain. I was digging a hole for myself that was becoming increasingly difficult to crawl out of. Sure enough, the next few games, I found myself staying away from the net, just far enough so that I wouldn't

be in a shooting opportunity. When I did have the ball closer to the net instead of shooting, I would invariably look to pass to a teammate.

Why? Because my brain was closed, it did not want me to fail again and go through what I went through before. It wanted me to be happy, not sad or angry. Needless to say, I went through a pretty bad scoring slump. Looking back on it, I wish I had known that it was the perfect time for my fourteen-year-old self to make mistakes (I know that when athletes get older, mistakes are more costly, but they are still great learning opportunities!).

Ultimately, it's important to remember that mistakes are just information! Think of it as information to store in the library of the brain to use in the future. If athletes learn to calmly take the time to review the situation, they will learn how *not* to do things, how to adjust themselves for success, and how to focus on improving certain aspects of their performance. All of these factors will maximize their rate of growth (ROG).

Finally, in sports, playing a perfect game is next to impossible (in most sports it is impossible), failure is part of athletics. Essentially an athlete is signing up for constant failure with bits and pieces of success here and there, therefore, the sooner an athlete can come to grips with that and have a plan to learn and spike their ROG they better of they will be.

Key #2: Control Your Thinking

In September of 1993, the Colombian men's soccer team went to Argentina to play a World Cup qualifying game. Now, going to Argentina to play is tough in the best of times. Teams often struggle to get even a tie, so a win would seem somewhat miraculous to most countries, especially considering that up to that moment, Argentina had *never* lost at home. Well, that day has become historic for many reasons, one of which being that Colombia proceeded to hand Argentina its first and worst loss at home in a World Cup qualifying by beating them 5-0. This was an incredible score, and, with that, not only did Colombia finish first in the South American qualifying group, but many experts had made them as the odds-on favorite to win the World Cup the following year (1994) in the United States.

Coincidentally at that time, the Colombian drug cartel was highly active and many of these powerful and dangerous people were soccer fanatics who had close ties with the national team and its players. They loved their national team and were so confident that they would win the world cup that they bet millions of dollars in the black-market gambling scene, that this would indeed happen. When the World Cup arrived, Colombia faced their first match against

Romania when the unthinkable happened: Romania surprises and beats Colombia 3-1. A shocking result!

In World Cup group stages, you have three games, and if you lose the first one, you need to win the second game because a tie does not guarantee qualification to the next round, and a second loss pretty much guarantees elimination. Colombia's second game is not an easy one—it's against the home nation, the United States. They would be playing in the Rose Bowl stadium in front of 93,000 mainly pro-American fans. What happens next is not only stuff of legends but so fascinating that ESPN 30 for 30 documentary series has one episode dedicated to this event.

As the story goes, a few hours before the kick-off against the United States, one of these drug lords calls the coach, Francisco Maturana, and quite explicitly reminds him that they have millions of dollars at stake. So, Colombia better win this match. He also tells coach Maturana (not asks) not to play a certain player but to play someone else instead, and that if he didn't adhere to this request, that the drug lords knew exactly where his family lived. *He threatened the coach with harming his family if he didn't follow his directions!* The phone conversation ended with this individual telling the coach to remind all the players that they have a lot of money at stake here and that if they don't win, they know exactly where all their families live. *He threatened the whole team!* I know what your thinking—this is just insane. And yes, it is.

Coach Maturana, was crying as he went to a pre-match meeting with his players where he told them about the phone conversation he had, and he essentially tells them that it was up to them if they want to proceed and play the game. However, he also told them that if they decide to play, he was going to obey the request of not playing a certain player, since he did not want to take a chance with the threat. After discussing it for a bit the players decide to go ahead and play the game.

At this point, I ask my athletes to predict the outcome. Most say it's not going to be good because the players would be under too much pressure, they would be distracted, and wouldn't be able to focus on what they needed to do. They are absolutely right.

When you constantly have that much pressure and a mix of thoughts and emotions in your mind, it's extremely difficult to perform at your best. Plus, don't forget your brain wants to keep you calm and relaxed. This by no means is it a calm and relaxed situation, therefore, the brain begins to shut down and doesn't let these players easily access information they need to play at their best.

I tell this story because many times, young athletes feel like the weight of the world is on their shoulders. They feel that if they don't perform well at a certain game or event, they won't get scouted, or they won't get selected. I tell my athletes that it's important to take a step back and *think about what your thinking!*

The athlete then needs to ask themselves the following questions:

- If I have a bad game, is my career over?
- Are there no other opportunities for me down the road?
- Don't I learn from mistakes, so I can get better?
- Can I use circumstances to adjust what I'm doing?
- Are my thoughts on something that I can control?
- Is my situation as dire of that of Colombia in 1994?
- *Are my thoughts on something I have 100% control over?*

No, no one has probably ever threatened you. No, your young career is not over if you have a bad game, even if it's for the championship. Yes, there will be other opportunities to get scouted, and yes, we learn from our mistakes.

The last question that any athlete should ask themselves is of utmost importance and that's because usually we have our mind/thoughts on things we can't control! If you think about it what are the things athletes can not control in competition well here's a start, the referees/judges, the other team, your teammates, the crowd, coaches behaviour/decisions, weather, playing area conditions, bounces, schedule etc. And now what are the things an athlete has 100% control over in competition? Let me give you a hint it's not many.

Essentially an athlete can control only three things. One, their physical readiness, which includes rest, nutrition, hydration, stretching etc. Two, their effort level. It does not matter the score or situation an athlete can always make the decision to put their best foot forward despite trying circumstances. The third is by far the most important, an athlete can control their 'thinking.' This is the most important because it's what triggers #1 and #2 and essentially gets you feeling the right way that gets you acting like you need to perform at your best. If an athlete ever has their mind on anything besides the three things, they can control they are wasting their time and energy. Note: If I can allow for one exception that would be if an athlete takes a look at their opponent to remind themselves of their strength and weaknesses this can be very beneficial but it needs to be for this sole purpose and for a limited period of time, then it's back to what he/she can control.

Key #2 – Control Your Thinking



What can you not control?

- Other team
- Teammates
- Coaches
- Refs/umpires/judges
- Parents (crowd)
- Bounces
- Playing conditions (weather, surface)
- Schedule

What can you control?

1. Physical Readiness: nutrition, rest, conditioning
2. Effort (games/practices)
3. Thinking – leads to
Feelings = Behaviour

That's it!

Once again, by examining yourself through rational questioning, you as an athlete will learn to control your thoughts and emotions, learn from the situation and maximize your *rate of growth*.

Feeling nervous is normal, and there's nothing wrong with that. In fact, pressure is energy that can be used to an athlete's advantage. It's when you let it overwhelm you that it becomes an issue.

To quote Sidney Crosby of the Pittsburgh Penguins, "I don't think you're human if you don't get nervous." I like to explain it like this. Pressure is the reason a tennis ball or a basketball work. The air inside the ball puts just enough pressure on the rubber (tennis ball) or leather (basketball), so it bounces and can be used in a game. With too much pressure, the ball will burst and will become useless, so you throw it in the garbage. With no pressure, the ball doesn't bounce and it's useless. Just the right amount of pressure is useful and needed for optimal performance. It's the same for a young athlete: by managing their emotions, they won't eliminate the pressure/nervousness, but they will manage it and can use its useful energy to their advantage.

Many times, young athletes feel the weight of the world on their shoulders, I want you to know that it's OK to feel some pressure and nerves. Use it as the energy it is to ignite your positive thoughts and feelings that you can ride into competition. Stop it before it gets to the point where it overwhelms you. You can do this by taking notice of what possible negative

thoughts are going through your mind and adjusting them, if necessary, using the process I showed you in chapter four.

If you're a parent or coach reading this, we need to make sure we are in full support of our athletes, no matter the outcome. And that means being part of the development, rather than part of the added pressure.

If you're wondering what happened in the game between Colombia and the United States... Well, the United States won the match 2-1. I think that was a pretty predictable outcome. The worst part of this story is, Colombian defender Andres Escobar, in an attempt to clear the ball from in front of his net, accidentally kicked into his own net for an own goal. Five days later in Colombia, he was shot and killed!

Key #3: Level of Commitment

Knowledge is great, but it's only great if it's used. In my workshops I tell my athletes that it's great that you're here to learn more about the importance of being mentally tough and how much of an impact their mind has on their overall performance. As you now know, it has a tremendous impact whether you work on it or not. The question is, are your thoughts helping or hindering your performance? Therefore, I ask my athletes, "Are you going to commit to doing something about it?"

Over the years, I've worked with enough athletes and teams to feel comfortable saying that the athletes who take my MTC program fall into one of three categories.

1. The Pretenders: 10% do absolutely nothing. I mean zero, nada, they basically show up because their parents/team/organization hired me and told them they had to attend. They feel they don't need or want the help or the knowledge. Or quite possibly think of me or the material as not inspiring.
2. The Contenders: 80% dabble and do some of the work I prescribe to them. They do some of the assignments, take down some notes, somewhat participate in the activities, etc. They learn what it is to be stronger mentally at first, and then they forget or decide it's not a priority. The knowledge quickly fades and eventually lost.
3. The Champions: Then, there's the 10% that really see value in my teachings, in the strategy, they see the potential power of the mental game tools I teach them. So, they follow through with assignments, actively participate in activities, and really focus as I bring out new concepts and ideas,

Who do you think benefits the most? Who becomes the mentally tough athlete? Obviously, the one that puts in the level of commitment necessary to see progress.

Therefore, you the person reading this book, you've taken the initial step. Whether that's you the parent, the coach or the athlete. Now it's time to transfer the knowledge into action. For this a commitment of time is necessary. Time to read and time to practice. If you're a parent or coach you may feel it would be best to read the book first, understand the program and the learning, and then work with your athlete(s) or, even yet, after reading the book you may opt to give the book to your athlete(s), so they can follow the program on their own. Any one of these scenarios can work, but a commitment needs to be made by you and/or the athlete to follow the process so that real tangible changes can take place and for the athlete to have the best opportunity to develop to their potential.

Ok, now the next step is for the athlete to commit to:

1. A set schedule of when they will practice the mental game tools (homework) they will be learning. This initially would only be 2 days of the week for 10 minutes a day. That's 20 minutes a week!
2. Actively use the tools at training, before a competition, during competition and post-competition.

Again, knowledge is nice, but it's only powerful when put into practice. It's easy to do the physical work an athlete needs to do to be successful because the results are tangible. Since the mental side of development is not tangible, it's easy for athletes to sense that there's a lack of results, they begin to ignore and eventually push aside even though growth is happening. Usually, the first to notice changes are those around the athlete, parents, coaches even teachers. I was working with a 11-year-old hockey player when his dad mentioned that his teacher commented that she's noticed a change in behaviour and communication skills with the young man who directly attributed doing the mental-toughness program to his change.

Athletes need to commit to developing their mental toughness! They need to add this to their schedule, just like they know when they go to train/practice, when games/competitions are they need to know when to sit down for 10 minutes and 'train their brain'.

Key #4 – Action is What Matters

Business guru, Gary Vaynerchuk tells us, "Start matching your work ethic with your mouth." Now that a commitment has been made to train your brain, the next step is to quite simply: put in the work. There is no substitution for hard work and perseverance. Most athletes

might think, I work hard, I'm putting in the work needed but I suggest you take a step back and re-examine that. Usually there is another level of work rate you can get to. And unfortunately, many times that entails doing things you don't want to because you don't like it, it's boring, you think it's a waste of time.

As a young soccer player, I had a big problem, I hated to run at practice but it was important because I played a position that had me running virtually all game long, so what did I do? I joined the cross-country team at my school. I hated every second of it. I especially hated waking up early to practice but I made the commitment because I knew it was going to help me at soccer and when I started running, I ran hard! My first race I was one of the last to arrive but with each subsequent year I got better and better and eventually was finishing in the top 5 of every race, I was even offered a scholarship at a local track club (which I quickly turned down).

The result doing this hard work even though it was not fun, exciting or easy was that I became an engine on the field. While others tired in the last fifteen minutes of the game, I continued my high level of play when it mattered the most.

I'm not here to sugar-coat anything, mental-toughness training for 95% of athletes will be boring, challenging and difficult to get through. For those that persevere the rewards are confidence, focus, resiliency and clearer thinking and better decision making when it matters most.

In Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Outliers*, he presents research that shows that for anyone to develop their full potential in any discipline, it takes 10,000 hours of training! That's a lot of practice. To put it into practical terms, it would mean that if an individual trained 5 days a week for two hours a day, fifty weeks out of the year (I'll give you 2 weeks' vacation), it would take 20 years to accumulate the 10,000 hours. The lesson here? There is no shortcut! Work needs to be put in, but in the athletic world, not all work is of equal value.

When an athlete commits (there's that word again) to train, it's important they don't just go through the motions. You need to work hard on whatever it is your working on that day, this will maximize your rate of growth. In the same way, work hard on your mental game, this will give you a distinct advantage over most of your competition because I can confidently say most young athletes don't train their brains. Less than 1% do!

Athletes should continuously ask themselves:

- Are my actions appropriate for what I want to accomplish?
- Am I doing enough to improve?

- What else can I do? And,
- Am I mentally prepared to play at my best?

And then go out and do the work.

You've probably heard the saying, "There's no substitute for hard work." Of course, it's true, but I can also say that *how* you do the work can make all the difference in the world. In the area of mental-skills training, there is a secret: there is a small hack when it comes to doing the work and training to get your 10,000 hours. Let's say a young basketball player wants to improve his/her free throws. Well, the options are A) to stay after practice and shoot some free throws, B) find some spare time, and go to the schoolyard to shoot some free throws, or C) (and this is the fascinating one) you can sit at home in a quiet place, close your eyes, and imagine shooting free throws!

You see, your brain doesn't know the difference between physically doing something and imagining yourself doing something. The same neuro-electrical receptors and connections fire off in your brain! The first time I heard of this I was amazed. However, the more I thought about it, the more I can see this influence in my athletic career. The power of imagery is incredible, and we'll talk more about this in another chapter.

So, if it's raining outside or you don't have access to a facility to train, you can continue your development by training your brain through imagination of you performing the task. Want to improve your hitting, sit at home close your eyes and focus on hitting, hockey players want to improve your shot, soccer players your first touch, volleyball players your bumps etc. you can all close your eyes and imagine (in detail) what you need to do.

It's easy for athletes to have big goals or dreams, but it's another thing to do what is necessary to make it happen. Most athletes don't realize what is needed for them to get to where they want to go. That's why it's best to be prepared mentally, so that when they confront the inevitable challenges along the way, they are ready to overcome and triumph.

There you have it, the 4 Keys to Thinking Like a Champion. The beginning of a winning way of thinking that will propel an athlete to the next level of mental toughness and overall performance.

Chapter 6: Success is Guaranteed

Success does not lie in 'results' but in 'efforts,'

'being,' the best is not so important

'doing' the best is all that matters

— *Anonymous*

How can that be?

I know what you are thinking there is nothing that can guarantee success in the world of athletics. And yes, to a certain extent you are right. But let me explain my philosophy on this concept.

I always ask my athletes to write down what success will look like this year for them. Regardless of whether they come to me as individuals or as part of a team sport, I ask them to write down what success will mean to them as a team. You can imagine the answers I get!

For individuals, they most often want to be the leading goal scorer in the whole league, or they want to have the most points in the league. Or, they often want to be ranked #1 in their age bracket and have the best save percentage in the league. When it comes to team success, the answer is invariably: we want to be league champions, we want to be state or provincial champions, or we want to be national champions.

All of these, as a starting point, are worthy goals to strive for. However, the problem is that if this is an athlete's perception of success, then most of them are just setting themselves up for a big disappointment! Why? That's because only one team will be league champion, only one team will be state or provincial champion, and only one person will be ranked #1 at his/her age. So, does that mean that everyone else has been a failure? Has everyone else wasted their time, effort, and money? Of course not! Therefore, we need to make sure that as athletes success needs to be defined in a much different way.

As you know by now, my job is to inspire and mentally train athletes, so they can reach their full potential and hopefully fulfill their athletic goals. Many of these athletes are driven individuals that dream of playing pro in the best leagues in the world, and that want to represent their country at World Championships and Olympics. They want athletic scholarships in the best schools. These are no small goals. Therefore, if I'm being honest with myself, how many of these athletes will reach their goals?

Here are some statistics compiled by the NCAA:

- Men's basketball: High school senior players that eventually get drafted by an NBA team, 0.03%. That's roughly the chance of getting four of a kind in the first round of a poker game!
- Women's basketball: High school senior player that eventually get drafted by a WNBA team, 0.02%. That's the same chance that a killer asteroid will destroy civilization in the next century!
- Men's Hockey: High school senior players that eventually get drafted by an NHL team, 0.04%. That's the chance of flipping heads eight times in a row!
- Baseball: High school players that eventually make MLB, 0.015%. That's roughly the chance a thief will guess your PIN number the very first time!
- Men's Soccer: High school players that eventually get drafted by an MLS team, 0.08%
- Men's Football: High school players that eventually get drafted by an NFL team, 0.09%

Keep in mind that being drafted, which is what these percentages are, is no guarantee of a successful professional career. This study prompted the NCAA to conclude: "Student-athletes whose sole and now failed objective was to make the pros suddenly find themselves in a world that demands skills their universities did not require them to learn."

I've coached four athletes that have won Olympic medals, and at least twenty have gone on to represent their country at World Championships, yet I've worked with hundreds if not thousands of athletes over the years.

To highlight my point on success I suggest you watch a video on YouTube called 'This is Why You Should Never Let a Strategy Define Your Life. It's the story of a young man named Ikey Johnson, who was nine games away from being a top-30 draft pick in the NFL and consequently being a multi-millionaire. Then, tragedy hit. He got injured to the point where his doctors told him that he would never play football again. Having grown up poor, Ikey struggled with this news, but he decided that all the hard work on the training ground was not going to be for nothing. So, after being rehabilitated from his injuries, he left the hospital in record time, and became acutely aware that he was no longer the same Ikey Johnson from a few years ago, he was someone far different.

Ikey calls it *sweat equity*: all those long days of training, giving it his all to pursue his dream changed him. As he says, "It built a certain type of spirit, it built a certain type of

mentality (mental toughness), it built a certain type of individual, so now I couldn't quit even if I wanted to. It has turned me into a machine".

The process an athlete goes through in pursuing a dream changes them. This is why I teach with passion, and I know my MTC program works. I sleep well at night knowing that even if my athletes don't reach their dreams, they will be well-prepared for what the world demands and will win at the game of life. *This* is success, and this is why I say that success is guaranteed if you follow my unique mental toughness coaching program.

This may not mean much to an athlete as they have a clear focus on what they want to achieve however as a parent or coach you can appreciate this unequivocal truth. All athletes that pour everything they have into the pursuit of their dream especially if they include brain training will be different. They will be better, after going through this long and tough road. They will be building character.

Personally, when I finally realized this, it was an awakening for me. As I looked back on my athletic career, I could unequivocally say I truly gave it everything I had. I didn't leave anything that was within my control to chance. This finally brought me peace of mind, and I was able to move on with my life.

My athletic experience has opened many doors for me, which is why I am in such a unique position to do what I do now: help athletes succeed in sports and the game of life!

Who do you become while pursuing your athlete dream?

Someone with good character, which means...

- A hard worker
- Cooperates with others
- Good communicator
- Helps Resolve Conflict
- Encourages and Supports
- A good friend
- Mentally tough person
- Winning/Championship = Bonus

Chapter 7: Teamwork is Crucial

The truth is teamwork is at the heart of great achievement

— John C Maxwell

Strength in Numbers

At the beginning of this session, I typically start with an activity, and I would suggest you do likewise. I break my athletes into groups of three to four, and if I'm in a lecture hall with a really big group, then I have each row of seating work together.

I provide each group with a handful of blank cue cards and the directions are the following. Everyone must place one hand behind their backs and can only use the free hand to work together and build something in five minutes. That's all the instructions I give them. If they ask me questions during this time, I will definitely answer them. Some ask me if they can bend the cue card or if they can use other objects? The answers are usually 'yes', there's very few restrictions, except you can only use one hand.

It's quite fascinating to see how the groups begin to work and interact. Some begin to work together quite early in the process, whereas others take a bit of time. Some are creative at the beginning, while others look around to see what the other groups are doing.

As the end of the five minutes approach, I give them a warning, and once their time is up, I ask them to stop and take a step back, like the cooking shows do. It's interesting to see what some groups manage to come up with. Some build quite unique structures, while others, in their rush to finish, unfortunately have their masterpiece crumble to the ground and have nothing left. On more than a few occasions, I've witnessed envious teammates blow down another team's creation.

It really doesn't matter what they have created. The point of this exercise is to demonstrate to the young athletes how they can create some very interesting and innovative structures in just five minutes by working together. So, I ask them how long they think it would've taken them to do something similar on their own?

From many of them I get the 'Aha' look. I give them quick examples such as how in one group an athlete suggested folding the cue card in half so they can stand it up. Another player suggested leaning it against the water bottle to be more stable. Everyone pitched in and only then could something truly great happen within a reasonable period of time. They all realize it would've taken them a heck of a lot longer if they tried to put something together individually.

The truth is, no one has ever accomplished anything great in sports (or in life for that matter) by themselves! Now, this is easy to understand in team sports, but it's also true in individual sports. There is always a coach pushing and instructing, a mentor guiding, a colleague helping, a foe challenging, or a parent supporting who has their imprints in the athletic accomplishment. The sooner a young athlete realizes and accepts this, the better off he/she will be.

“What is the connection between developing yourself as an athlete and teamwork?” I ask my athletes. They often ponder this question and sometimes have trouble articulating it. But the answer always comes out. It's important every young athlete understand that:

- they can't do it all by themselves
- they need others to succeed
- there's strength in numbers

I give them the following example: you can do most things with one finger, like point, move things around, scratch, etc. With five fingers, you can do a lot more, like grab, push, pull, and some strong people can even do push-ups using just their fingers but not many. However, when five fingers come together as a fist, it's even stronger. When this happens, you can protect yourself, breakthrough things, and a lot more people would be able to do push-ups with their hands in a fist position. The fist protects the fingers which are a lot more vulnerable to break when in an open hand position.

It's the same way in athletics. Many times, young athletes figure they can rely on their talent and continue to move forward on their own. To a certain extent, they can. However, sooner or later, they will need to rely on someone or a bunch of people to maximize their development and reach their full potential.

Markers of Good Teamwork

Many people consider the Lake Placid Olympic semi-final hockey game between the United States and The Soviet Union as the biggest upset in sports history. It is known as the 'miracle on ice,' to which a movie with the same name was made. The Soviets entered the 1981 Olympic hockey tournament as the heavy favorites to win the gold medal (and rightly so). They had won four straight Olympic gold medals and the last two World Championships. Their roster was full of professional players, including some superstar players in their prime (Tretiak and Kharlamov), as well as some other young, rising stars. They even annihilated the United States in an exhibition game just shortly before the start of the Olympics.

The Americans team was made up of mostly collegiate players with an average age of 21 who hadn't played together for very long prior to the Olympics. Yet somehow, they all, from the coaches to the last player, found a way to use every bit of their talent, physical strength, mental toughness to come together as a team and accomplish what most thought was impossible. They beat The Soviet Union 4-3 and went on to win the gold medal.

This victory brought many US players to notoriety, and many that were previously overlooked were now given tryouts on NHL teams. In all, thirteen players played in the NHL (five of them playing 500 games and three playing more 1000 games). Who knows if any of these players might have been given the same opportunity if the team hadn't won the gold and just been eliminated without any fanfare?

This spectacular sports event is a great example of where team success can lead right to individual success. This is important for athletes to understand because many times he/she may find themselves frustrated with team results and their teammate's commitment levels. However, they still need to work hard for the team, so he/she can achieve what they want individually. They need to be a good teammate!

What is a good teammate? I ask my young athletes at this point and, little by little, the right answers come out. Most have a good understanding of what a good teammate looks like. In my MTC program, I teach that good teammates live by the following principles:

- 1) *Respect one another*: athletes don't have to be best friends with everyone on their team or with every coach, but they should respect each other. They need to be convinced that everyone has their best interest at heart, even though it may not always seem to be this way.

Take, for example, a player who feels that his/her teammate is not passing the ball to them on purpose. This may or may not be the case, but either way this thinking pattern and consequent lack of respect for the teammate may cause decisions on the playing field that could adversely affect a player's productivity. By respecting the teammate, the right decisions will be made on and off the field, and development will continue both athletically and mentally.

- 2) *Active Participation*: This goes back to Key #4 of thinking like a champion, and that is...work hard! You've made a commitment, you have a schedule to adhere to, so actively participate by working hard and pushing yourself and your teammates. Don't just go through the motions even though you feel your teammates are.

- 3) *Communication*: provide teammates with constructive feedback. If you see something that can be improved, it should be said so tactfully.
- 4) *Open to Feedback*: In the same idea as the previous point, young athletes should be open to feedback, especially from teammates. They should have the confidence to know that teammates want the best for them which ultimately means better results for the team.
- 5) *Trust*: A good teammate should give out a feeling of trust so that teammates can feel comfortable in asking for feedback and advice, without having to worry that they will be mocked.
- 6) *Accountability* - a good teammate doesn't just encourage others, but also pushes his teammates and competitors to try to get them to a higher level. You work hard it becomes contagious.

I once worked with a young athlete (we'll call him David) who was a fencer and was consistently ranked in the top 10 provincially for his age, so he was a talented athlete. As I began to work with him, it quickly came out that one of his biggest challenges was facing his friends at these fencing tournaments. It just so happened that David faced them often because they went to many of the same tournaments, and since they have seen each other often over the years, he had become good friends with a handful of them.

As I probed a bit more, the deeper problem soon came out: David was apprehensive about facing his friends because when he beat them in the past, which he did regularly, he had seen how his friends had felt bad and, on a few occasions, cried after their match. This disturbed him because he didn't want to potentially lose the friendship. Consequently, he thought he was being a good friend and a good teammate by letting his friends beat him. He thought this would make them feel better about themselves, be more confident, and they could keep their friendship intact.

However, the other side of the coin was that when David lost to his teammates, it often meant the end of his tournament. So, he would go home and, as he put it, he felt he wasted his parents time and money because many of these tournaments were far from home. David, in his mind, was stuck in the middle: should he beat his teammates and possibly lose their friendship, or lose to his teammates and disappoint his parents?

Now, there's several issues we can get into here, but let us focus on the teammate part. At this point I will ask you, is David being a good teammate? David reasons in his mind that by not beating his friends they will be happy, gain confidence, and keep being his friend.

However, he fails to see that, by the nature of them all being high-performance young athletes with big goals and dreams (David's dream is to make the Olympics), he's not pushing his friends, or himself, to the level that they need to be at to succeed.

David fails to provide feedback to them as to what aspects of their sport they need to improve to get to the next level. Furthermore, we all know by now that failure is key to success, as it activates an athlete's rate of growth, which is fundamental in reaching their highest potential. Remember, all athletes learn much more from mistakes than successes.

David had good intentions but in his chosen discipline and level of competition, it was not the right course of action for a good friend and good teammate.

Every young athlete needs to know that teamwork is necessary for them to reach their own personal goals and accomplishments. This teamwork comes from many channels such as actual teammates, sport coach, fitness trainer, parents, mental toughness coach etc. The more help and feedback a young athlete can get the more he/she can use to up their game to another level.

Chapter 8: Mental Game Tools, The Foundations

*The secret is to show up, do the work,
and go home. A blue-collar work ethic married to
indominable will. It is literally that simple.*

— Christopher Sommer

Time for ‘The Mental Game’

Alright now, we’re down to the hands-on work. In this chapter, I’ll be introducing the first three mental game tools, which any athlete can quickly start to implement daily to take their mental toughness to another level. I know most athletes already have a busy schedule, but what I will provide won’t take much time or be invasive enough to disrupt current commitments. From a learning perspective, these tools will help an athlete approach problems with courage.

We all instinctively have a certain amount of mental toughness, and some are naturally better with these tools than others. The idea is to make it a habit to learn from these tools and practice them. If you do so, you will become sharply aware when each tool is needed for a specific hurdle you need to overcome and even better after practicing them for a few months you won’t even have to remember them, it becomes a habit. Alright here we go...

Mental Game Tool # 1: Centered Breathing

In theory, this isn’t a mind-tool—it’s a physical act. However, what it does is prepare the body and the mind for all other tools that proceed it. Therefore, it’s critical that it is done right and done often.

Centered breathing is taught all over the world and to high-performance athletes. You can see athletes practicing centered breathing all the time at centre stage in the Olympics and World Championships in any sport. The reason is because it’s vital to reducing an athlete’s heart rate so that they can focus and execute the task at hand.

Here is how it works:

- 1) Place one hand on the stomach and the other on the chest. When you inhale, you must focus on having your lower hand (that’s the one on your stomach) extend first,

then followed by the expansion of your chest. Now, this usually isn't a natural breathing movement, as most athletes are used to breathing shallow (from the chest) because they are either tired from competition and trying to catch their breath or just very nervous. A real, concerted effort needs to be made to breathe, starting from low in the belly. Alright try this stomach-centered breathing for twenty seconds.

- 2) Upon exhaling, the athlete needs to noticeably drop the shoulders. Not only is this physically important but also psychological. It's as if an athlete is letting go of what might be causing concern and stress. Getting that monkey off your back. Ok, add this to your breathing and try it for 20 seconds.
- 3) The exhale needs to be twice as long as the inhale. Ideally, you would like two seconds on the inhale and four seconds on the exhale. However, this would be nearly impossible during the middle of competition when an athlete might be trying to catch his/her breath. In this case you just want to make sure the focus is on the fact that each exhale should be twice as long as the inhale.

Now, have your child practice the whole routine for at least a minute. Again, inhale from the stomach, as you exhale drop the shoulders and exhale is twice as long as the inhale. That's the 'centred breathing technique,' which is vital for all other tools to work.

At this point have your child identify where they can use this technique (writing them out would be better for this exercise). As an example, a basketball player can do it during a time out, when the ball is out of bounds, or when he/she is on the bench, during a free throw. A hockey player can practice this while he/she is in the penalty box or before a face off.

All athletes can do it on the way to the game, during warm-up, etc. You get the picture; your child needs to know that centered breathing needs to become a normal part of their routine and can be done anywhere, anytime to get themselves focused.

Mental Game Tool #2 - Self Talk

Self-talk was my biggest mental weakness during my years as an athlete. Thinking back to when I missed my first-ever open net, I remember quite clearly that I was mean to myself. You wouldn't believe the negative self-talk that was coming from my brain. Aside from all the cuss words I was using, I was also saying things like, "What's wrong with you Gad? You're losing it! How could you miss that? No way the coach is going to pick you to take the next penalty shot now! Miss another one like that and you'll probably be moved to another position."

All this was negatively affecting my emotions and, ultimately, the rest of my performance. Needless to say, I didn't have a very good rest of the game.

It's quite astonishing to recognize the negative things we sometimes say to ourselves. In my case, if my coach would have run on the field and begun swearing at me, telling me that I'm losing it, that I won't be taking penalty shots anymore, there's no way I would have just stood there and taken that abuse, and there's definitely no way my parents would have allowed that to happen. Yet, I was perfectly ok with doing it to myself!

Many young, talented athletes get caught in this trap of perfectionism. For some, things have gone so well for so long that as soon as some adversity hits, they begin to doubt themselves and their abilities. We have already gone through the why these situations are helpful and should be expected, so with time it's just part of the territory in competitive sports. You don't always win. However, many young athletes just find it very difficult to accept. It's important to learn the power of self-talk and, more specifically, *how to use it for your benefit*.

This is how it works; we all have our little, evil mini-me on one shoulder and our nice mini-on the other shoulder. Athletes need to learn the discipline of shutting out the negative voice that leads to them beating themselves up and feeling angry and desperate, which is just going to prolong the lack of production and make it more difficult to change the results. The mentally strong athlete understands this and makes a concerted effort to feed the positive mini-me.

Now, I'm not saying an athlete won't feel angry or upset about missing a simple play. I'm saying that we want the player to transition quickly out of that state and into a positive state, so that they can move past that experience and be ready to perform as soon as possible. Again, think of this as finishing that book (memory) positively before it's stored in your brain's subconscious library.

For positive self-talk to work, it needs to have 2 components:

- 1) *The Pep Talk*: Your child needs to have a few catch phrases that become easy to memorize and repeat as needed. It could be anything from, "Don't worry, Gad, you've scored hundreds of goals before, you'll score hundreds more," to, "Gad, you're an excellent player, everyone misses once and a while."
- 2) *Fix Your Mistake*: If we just leave it at giving ourselves a pep talk, we lose the opportunity to learn from our mistake which, as you know, is key for development through maximizing our Rate of Growth (ROG). After any pep talk, a young athlete must analyze what went wrong and fix it in his mind. This also starts the all-

important reprogramming of your brain. It changes the emotion (memory) of that experience so it's stored as an opportunity for future use.

If I were to put these two components together, fixing my experience of missing an open net could've been: (Pep Talk) Don't worry everyone misses, you've been playing well up until now, stay focused but remember next time (Fix Situation) keep your eye on the ball, lock your ankle, follow through the ball, and don't lean back!

This exercise could have been done in a few seconds and most certainly, while the goalie went out to retrieve the ball, that I had kicked over the net. If this was my approach, it would have changed my emotion, my eventual thoughts, and, very likely, how I played the rest of the game. Plus, it most definitely would've changed the ending of that experience in the library of my brain for future, subconscious use.

Since I didn't do this I remember clearly being apprehensive about running in front of the net, for months after this, in fear that I would once again miss an easy opportunity to score.

Positive self-talk can easily be done by every athlete at an appropriate time but the sooner the better. Make sure you start implementing this right away.

Pep Talk Homework

An athlete needs to begin to build their library of quick, positive self-talk phrases that they can use when needed. The shorter the better. Start with 10 phrases and build this to at least 20. As an athlete experiences adversity, it should be easier to come up with phrases to add to this list. After you've at least 10 pep-talk phrases, think about the time your self-talk was negative. Now go through the two-step positive self-talk process to fix the situation and change the ending of the book!

Mental Game Tool #3: Imagery/Visualization

While self-talk was my biggest weakness as an athlete growing up, *imagery* was no doubt my biggest strength. I remember how, as a little kid, I would give my younger brother a play-by-play account of us playing soccer and scoring some amazing goals. It would go something like this: "Gad takes a pass out wide, fakes by one defender and now does a scissors (fancy move) to get by another, he looks up and see's Edwin in the middle, he crosses a long perfect pass that Edwin chest and then volley's in the top corner! What a beautiful goal for Canada by the Espinosa brothers."

My younger brother would love this and ask me to do another one, to the point at which I got tired and told him to go to sleep, but I loved doing it. As I was telling these stories, I was imagining every single play and felt the excitement as the story unfolded. What I didn't know at the time was that I was using the amazing power of imagery for my future development as an athlete.

Before we get into developing this skill, I want you (athlete) to think about what your be-all end-all goal is. In other words what is it that you want to accomplish in the future? What is your goal, your dream? Now write this down.

For many athletes, this is a pretty easy question, but a few do hesitate and think about it for a bit. The answers I get go something like this.

- Be a professional hockey player
- Be a professional soccer player
- Play in Major League Baseball
- Represent my country in the Olympics
- Play in the pro golf circuit
- Play in the pro tennis circuit
- Get a Division 1 full athletic scholarship

These are all great goals and dreams to have, but they could be so much more powerful. I often show five minutes of another YouTube video called “[Visualization and Deliberate Practice](#),” published by John Roberts. I recommend you watch the video first (up to the 5:10 mark) before you continue reading. This video talks about the power of visualization, which is another word for imagery. There are several key points from this video that need to be discussed.

First, you should understand that powerful visualization/imagery is essentially like going into the future, living out your dream, and returning with a blueprint of that future. I think the key here is *living* in it, as it conjures up all those emotions that are so motivating. No doubt I was living in the future (and I'm sure my brother was as well) as I was doing play-by-play of our soccer exploits at bedtime.

The second point of this video is the fascinating story of POW Colonel Naismith. Imagine being stuck in a cell five feet, by five feet, by five feet for seven and a half years! This could drive anyone crazy, but Mr. Naismith had the discipline to train his brain to think about his golf every day—not just *sort of* think about it, but live it in his brain, as if he were playing his favourite golf course back home.

Now, I'm sure his intention was just to survive the horror of solitary confinement, but what he never realized was that he was practicing his golf game the whole time. Upon his release, he went to play his favourite golf course, and, to his amazement, he scored a 75, which was 20 strokes better than his previous best of 95. This is truly incredible and an amazing example of the power of Imagery.

What we can conclude from this story is that the Mental Game Tool of Imagery can help you not only train your brain to be a better athlete, but it can also help you overcome difficulties in multiple facets of your life. Best of all imagery is fun and can be practiced anywhere, anytime.

When I was twelve years old, I was watching a soccer game on TV, and I saw something that I had never seen before. I witnessed a player by the name of Hugo Sanchez score a goal by doing a diving header. Now, if you don't know what a diving header is in soccer, it's when a player throws his body so he's horizontal to the ground so he can meet the soccer ball in the air, which has been whipped across by a teammate. Then, he uses his head to place the ball in the net. It's an absolute beautiful goal, and that was the first time I had witnessed it. I couldn't sleep that night!

I kept thinking about that diving header and imagining myself scoring a goal like that. The next morning, I picked up a nerf soccer ball that I kept underneath my bed, and I proceeded to throw it at the wall on an angle, so that I could dive on my bed and head the ball in front of me to practice the diving header. As you could imagine, the landing on my bed made a loud sound, and it scared my mom, who promptly asked if everything was ok. I replied 'yes' nonchalantly and picked up the ball once more to practice the diving header for a second time. *Thump* went my bed once gain.

This time, my mom knew something was up, and she promptly said something to the effect of, "Stop what you are doing right now or else you're going to get it!" Knowing that my mom always delivered on her threats I promptly put the ball away and stopped practicing the diving header. *However*, night after night, I couldn't stop thinking and imaging that diving header.

A few months later, we were having an end of practice game. I remember clearly the moment my teammate crossed a ball in the air, as I was running in front of the net my brain did all the calculations it needed in those split seconds and it told me to do the diving header. I threw myself in the air and gracefully connected with the ball and watched it go in the net as I

fell to the ground. It worked out perfectly! My teammates were stunned, and, to a certain extent, I was surprised as well. They all came around and gave me a big high five or pad on the back.

The question is, why would my brain so confidently tell me to go ahead and do something I had never done before? Something I twice barely practiced on my bed and which no coach ever taught me to do? The answer is quite simple. As far as my brain was concerned, I had done it a hundred times before. Not only had I done it before, but every time I did it in my head, I had scored. We all dream about success not failure. My brain had hundreds of books in its subconscious library of me doing this particular play successfully and as far as it was concerned it was just another one of those plays, so it gave me the green light. This is the power of imagery.

You see the brain doesn't know the difference whether you are imagining something or actually doing something (I briefly touched on this in chapter 5). The same neuroreceptors and neuropathways are being programmed and you are developing and improving in the same way.

Imagery Homework

Time to practice the power of Imagery. To be really powerful, imagery needs to include as many senses as possible so its important that you (athlete) identify with each sense, so you can begin to include them in your imagery work.

Here is the activity to Activate the Senses:

Instructions: If an athlete is doing this on their own then they need to read the task and then close their eyes, start their centred-breathing technique and imagine it. If someone is helping the athlete with this then the athlete needs to close their eyes and start the centred-breathing technique and then they can imagine the outlined task which will be read to them. Once a specific sense has been worked, you can open your eyes for a little while before moving on to the next sense. Here we go.

Sight - (athlete closes eyes). Imagine sitting in front of your TV and or your computer. You have a completely black screen in front of you. From the right side of your screen a white number 5 appears and it makes its way to the middle of the screen, it could be dancing, walking or strolling its way to the middle. That's your choice. Now from the left side a white number 4 appears and it makes its way to the centre and stops to the left of number five. What number do you see now? Response should be '45'. Now from the right side a white number 1 appears

and dances its way to the centre of the screen and stops right beside number 5. Ask, now tell me what number do you see? The correct answer is 451. Ok, open your eyes for a second.

Sound - Now we're going to work on the sense of sound. Close your eyes. Imagine yourself sitting with a bunch of friends or family waiting for a parade to start. You don't see the band, but you start to hear it getting closer and closer, you hear the trumpet, the cymbals and the marching as it nears. Now imagine sitting by the shore of a lake by yourself. It's late, so it's dark and you can hear the sound of the water hitting the rocks as the waves break onto the shore. Focus on that sound of waves spilling onto the rocks and now you hear someone out of the blue call your name, but you can't quite make out the voice. They call your name a second time. Relax and open your eyes for a moment.

Touch - Close your eyes again. This time we are going to activate the sense of touch. Imagine yourself sitting in front of your TV with a dog or cat on your lap and you are petting it as you watch your favourite show. Imagine how the fur feels in your hand as you pet the animal. Now imagine yourself in a snowball fight but you have no gloves on. How does it feel to pick up that snow and mold it into a snowball? Probably wet and cold. Now imagine you're walking in a park and you see this great big tree. You run up to it to feel its trunk. How does the bark of this tree feel? Probably rough and tough. Ok, open your eyes.

Smell - Let's train our sense of smell. Close your eyes. This time you're walking to school and on your way, you walk in front of a flower shop and stop to smell the flowers. Imagine that smell. Now you continue your walk, and someone opens the door to the bakery just as you walk by and you smell fresh baked bread, mmm, and finally as you're getting closer to school you walk by a gas station, so now imagine that smell of gasoline. Once again slowly open your eyes.

Taste - Ok, last one. Close your eyes. You have a morning competition so you're having your breakfast. You're not eating a lot because you'll be competing soon. First, you bite into a banana. Imagine the sweetness of the banana., Then you have a spoonful of yogurt. Remember the taste of your favourite yogurt. Finally, you grab some almonds and crunch them in your mouth. Imagine the oily bland taste of the almonds. Ok, slowly open your eyes.

Awesome, you have now intentionally started to activate your senses while using the power of Imagery.

Do you remember the story I told back in Chapter 2 about the time my life was changed during the 1982 World Cup Final between Italy and West Germany? Well, after I witnessed Marco Tardelli cry with joy after scoring that winning goal, I couldn't get that picture out of my mind. In fact, I couldn't sleep for days. You see I always liked soccer and felt I was pretty

good at it and thought maybe one day I would like to play professionally, but after that day my goal and dream was as clear as day:

- I saw myself someday playing for Canada in the world cup, wearing a team Canada jersey with my last name above the number 10. - *Sight*
- I could hear the crowd erupt as I score a goal at the World Cup, and I am surrounded by the noise of cheerful fans, and, like Marco Tardelli, I even hear the fans chant my name. - *Sound*
- I celebrate my goal and let the sense of joy spread across my face and through my body. I then experience my teammates' weight as they jump on top of me in celebration. I lift the World Cup trophy to the world and feel its metallic weight in my palms. – *Feel*
- After the game, I enjoy a cold, bubbly glass of champagne in the change room. – *Taste*

I never wrote down my dreams on paper (no one ever told me to. I never received this training), but that day I undoubtedly stamped them with permanent invisible ink in my brain. It was clear, specific and detailed. Unbeknownst to me it included the senses that conjured up emotions that made it real, it was my blueprint of the future and the driving force for me for the rest of my athletic career.

You see, having a goal to be a professional athlete or to compete at the Olympics is fine, but for young athletes to reach their full potential, their goal or dream must be much more powerful than that. It needs to include as many senses and details as possible so that the brain can feel it as real. If your brain believes it, then it will create thoughts that motivate a young athlete to keep moving forward when they are struggling, when they are battling injury, when they feel like quitting or any other difficult situation. When I battled with my leg injury early in my career, it was this Marco Tardelli goal and all the associated emotions around it that inspired me to keep working.

Imagery Homework Pt. 2

Now, based on the information you now know, you (athlete) are going to re-write your overall goal/dream in a much more powerful way. In a way, that includes as many senses and details as possible. Don't rush this process, you need to take your time, so make sure to take at

least five minutes (and preferably more) because this document is a vital step to moving forward and becoming a mentally strong athlete. You will continue to use this down the road.

Here's an actual example from one of my athletes I worked with. The first time I asked him about his goal/dream, he merely wrote down, "I want to play in the NHL (National Hockey League)." After going through the senses' activity, my example and explanation of why detail is important he rewrote it to this:

"My dream is to play for the Los Angeles Kings. I want to score the game winning goal in the Stanley Cup final and celebrate with my teammates as we throw our gloves and sticks in the air. I want to skate around the ice rink with the Stanley Cup in my hands as the fans chant my name and I smell the popcorn that has been thrown on the ice during the celebrations. I want to be interviewed on national TV by Don Cherry and Ron MacLean as I'm hugging my parents."

Wow what a difference! Whenever my athletes read their re-done dream, I get excited for them. I feel the emotion that it conjures up, and when they are reading it to me, I can see their face light up. When I ask them about their own reaction, they begin to smile and tell me that they are excited and happy. Finally, I ask them to compare it to the first one they wrote, and they smile again, as if to say there's no comparison.

It's worth stating again that a young athlete's dream needs to be so powerful that it conjures up strong feelings that will motivate and inspire them. I call this an athlete's Emotional State Map (ESM). Essentially, this dream and everything in it becomes a map to getting a young athlete into an emotional state that will help them persevere in tough times and reach new levels of performance. It will make them mentally resilient.

Chapter 9 – Mental Game Tools, Game Changers

Prepare the mind and the body will follow.
— Coach Gad

Mental Game Tool # 4: Reframing

The Mental Game Tool of *reframing* is essentially the tool every young athlete needs to know in order to execute the concept of *embracing failure*. This is fundamental because we already went through the reasons why failing is a great learning opportunity, now we just need to know how to do it. Essentially, when something goes bad in a young athlete's performance, he/she is seeing it through a small frame or lens. Reframing the situation means, you need to take a step back and look at your circumstances differently, such as:

- A) Finding the good bits in the situation. Just like when you play well there's always things you could've done better, when you play bad or something bad has happened there's very likely some good things that has happened as well. Work at identifying the positives.
- B) Look at the big picture. Draw a large frame around the smaller frame (the problem) and look at the situation from a different perspective.

Take for example an artist that draws in the middle of a clean canvas smoke (the problem/mistake/situation), most people will immediately think he/she may be drawing a fire, an accident etc. (small frame). However, as the artist continues, there's a house with a chimney attached to the smoke, a stream to the side, some trees in the background, a bright sun in the sky, the whole painting at the end is much different than how it began. The lesson here is that perspective is important, and it helps you to have patience and be calm when a situation has gone really badly or does not feel like it makes sense.

Here's an example, I work with many goalies, which should come as no surprise, since being a goalie in any sport is stressful. Most goalies tell me they remember on at least one occasion letting in an easy goal that they should have saved. So, if we go through the reframing process it should sound and look something like this.

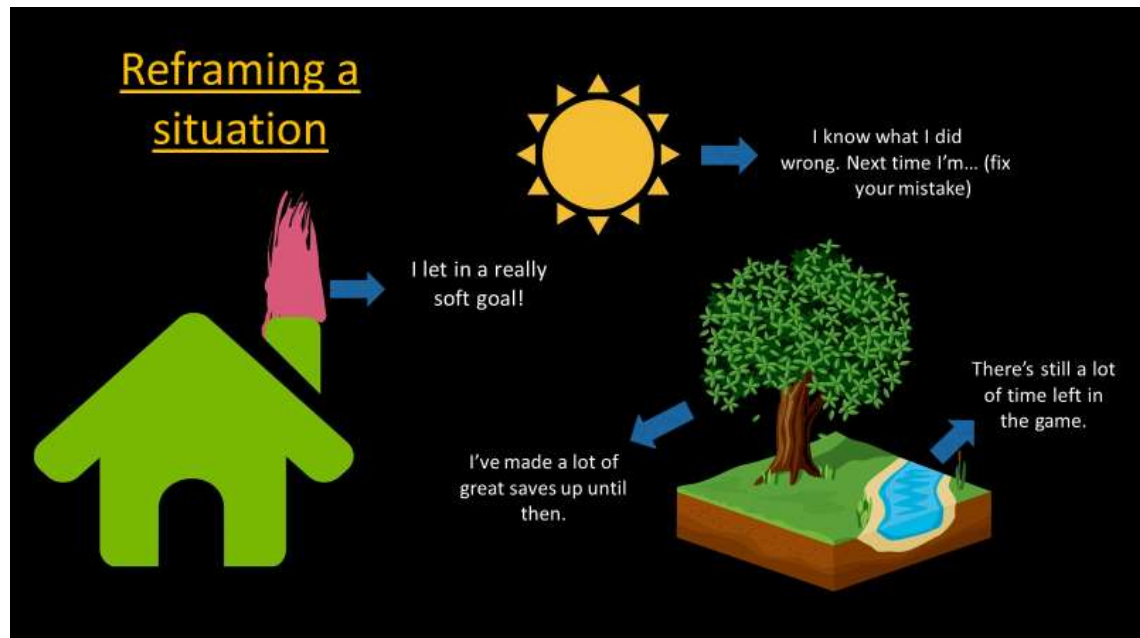
Smoke = letting is a really soft goal.

Stream of water = could represent the fact that there is still a lot of time left in the game and his team can comeback.

Trees = can represent the fact that he/she has made a lot of big saves up until that point in the game.”

Sun = can say, “I can learn from this mistakes, next time I’m going to…”

Many of these phrases are the ones that have already been worked on during the homework for Mental Game Tool #2 (Positive) Self-Talk. By doing this the athlete begins to see that although the situation may seem dire and bad at the time, it’s often not as bad as they may imagine, and they can still help change the result. Reframing is a method to keep motivated and keep moving forward. The very definition of mental toughness.



Ok, now it’s your turn. What was the last big mistake you remember doing in competition? Now take the time and reframe it. Take a step back and ask yourself, how could you look at it differently? What is the biggest hurdle in your situation? How could you have fixed it?

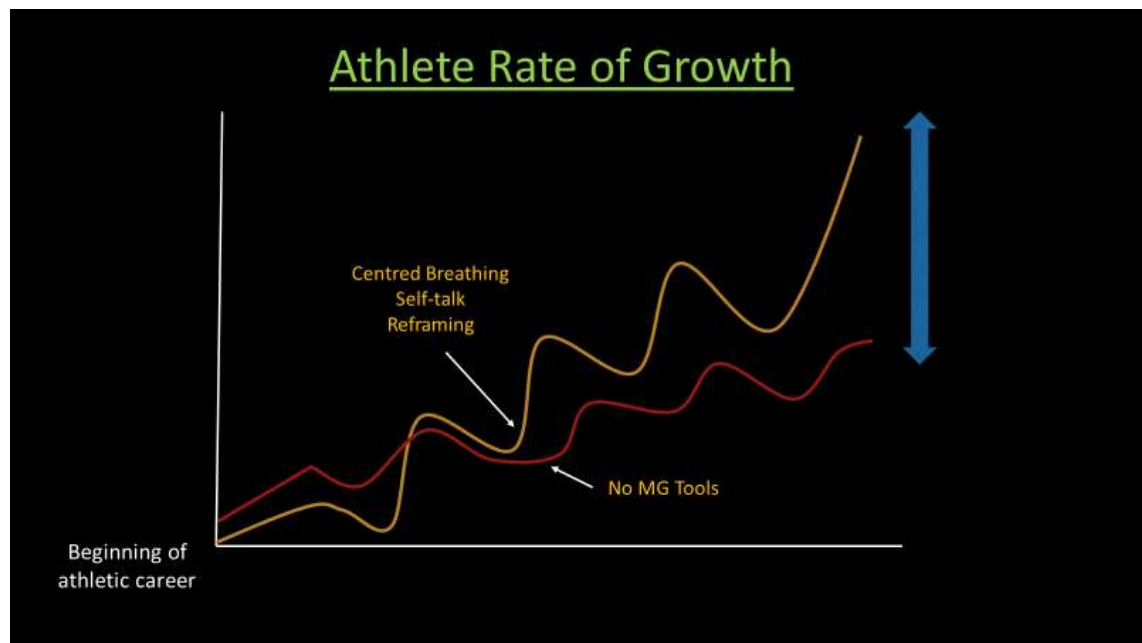
Strategy for re-framing any situation

First, an athlete needs to start with centered-breathing. Remember, something has gone wrong (smoke) so they are probably not too happy. This breathing technique will help the athlete relax a bit, control their heart rate and be ready for the next steps.

Second, use positive self-talk to ensure they pick themselves up using a quick pep talk and then fix the mistake. What could have been done differently or better?

Third, the athlete needs to finalize the fixing of the mistake by using the skill of imagery. Imagine the situation turning out just the way you want and then move on.

What an athlete does by reframing the bad situation is that they change the ending of the book, the memory that is stored in the library of their brain so next time a similar situation happens the young athlete does not freeze but instead confidently confronts the situation. This is the power of reframing! Reframing is the key to embracing failure and it jump starts your development (ROG) in adverse situations.



The challenge is an athlete needs to get proficient at reframing situations during competition. This way they are able to positively manipulate their emotional experience before that experience is stored.

Homework:

- 1) Reframe at least one more recent situation. This needs to be done on paper. Clearly outline the smoke (problem), and then clearly outline the stream, trees, and sun, the good stuff.
- 2) Find opportunities in the next week to reframe on the spot. Ideally in your athletic situation but it can also be in other areas (school) if the opportunity presents itself. This should help you get comfortable and familiar with the process and how it feels afterwards.

Mental Game Skill # 5: Focus

Focus is the centre of your interest and activity. Many world class athletes say that focus is the single most important Mental Game Tool an athlete can possess because learning how to ignore distractions and focus on the right things is key to success.

Let's go to our trusted videos to train the mental game tool of focus. This time you're going to look for a video called '[How to focus your mind in one minute](#)' on YouTube.

You can follow the instructions on the video, but essentially you will look at the screen. There will be numbers popping up with a bright highlight around them. As this highlight expands you breath in (from low in your belly), as it stops expanding you hold your breath and as the highlight goes away you breath out. Essentially, you're doing the centered breathing technique as the numbers and highlights appear and disappear. I show the technique for numbers #1 and #2 when working with an athlete and then I leave them on their own. It's a pretty simple and standard exercise that anyone can do. Ok go ahead and do this exercise.

Now that you've done this exercise, I have a very important question, "as an athlete what should you focus on?" This is important because as you get better at focusing you have to make sure you're focused on the right things! The answer to this question takes us back to Key #2 of – 'The 4 Keys to Thinking Like a Champion' chapter. It all boils down to this point: you need to focus on *the things you have 100% control over!* That's it, nothing else. And just in case you don't remember (most athletes don't) you only have 100% control of three things. One, your physical readiness, two, your effort level and three, your thoughts, understanding that your thoughts lead to your feelings and consequent behaviour.

This is where your focus needs to lie. If you want a clearer and more detailed explanation on this please refer back to chapter 5. There are so few things in the world of athletics that an athlete can control. Therefore, it's important to make every effort to focus and re-focus on the controllable factors of their performance.

In a workshop, at this point, I show that silent video again, but I add a twist that I don't tell them about...I start the video, and as the numbers start to pop up, I start to play music on my cell phone. I toss a tennis ball up and down. I do other weird things as the video is playing. Sometimes, the athletes start to giggle a bit and when the video ends, I asked them what was I trying to do to them? The answer is obvious: I was trying to distract them. This is important because in athletics most are in situations where it's quiet and calm. Athletes are usually in

situations where there's noise, action and at times chaos, therefore, they need to learn to focus when distractions are present.

The Focus Plan

Now that you know more about focus and its importance, let's work on really developing this mental game skill. This involves a 2-step plan:

#1, *Recognize why you lose focus* — Is it when parents are screaming on the sidelines or when the coach raises his voice? For me, it was during the warm-up before every game. As both teams were warming up, I would always look at the opposition on the other side of the field. Every team seemed so big, strong, fast and skilled during warm-up, and this got my nervous mind going. I kept thinking, "It's going to be a tough game today," but 90% of the time the team was never as good as I thought or as they looked. It was a complete waste of my time and energy.

Ask your yourself, what triggers make you lose focus, write them down (have at least two), that way next time you notice this you can catch yourself, clear your mind and reset. Which leads us to the next step.

#2, *The Re-focus Plan* — Alright, now that the young athlete has either identified a few triggers that throws him/her off focus or a mistake in competition has occurred, a plan of action is needed to get back on track. This is the plan

- *Centered Breathing* — Ask you child why we do this. By now they should let you know it helps to calm them down by slowing their heartrate.
- *Self-Talk (Positive)* – Your child should have a statement or two handy to say to themselves. Examples include, "let it go," or "focus on your next shift/event/opportunity."
- *Imagery* – Imagine the situation that has just happened with the end result being what you want, success. That is replay it in your mind and finish the book so that the ending and thus the emotion associated with it will help you succeed in the future.

You may have noticed that this is exactly the same process for the skill of 'reframing.' That's because reframing is what is needed for an athlete to reset and focus on the task at hand. Developing the incredibly important skill of *focus* is crucial to becoming a mentally strong athlete.

Homework:

The homework for this section is do the one-minute focus video twice a day, for every day of the week. The first time, with no distractions, and the second one, with distractions. Your child can bring in a pet, play music, or do anything they feel that will challenge them to focus on the numbers being displayed. By the way, they should do this on their own after you have shown them how to do it the first time.

Mental Game Skill - Confidence

Many of you might have been waiting for me to tackle this skill, and that is because playing with consistent confidence is the holy grail of sports for high-performing athletes. It takes time to develop but can be lost in a split second.

I begin by asking my athletes to think about the last time they truly played with confidence. As this memory comes to pass, a small grin usually starts to emerge from their face. “How did it feel I ask?” And they tell me it felt great, amazing, like they were having a lot of fun.

Confidence can be defined as *having the trust, faith and belief in one’s own abilities*. In athletics, it’s known as being in the zone. Playing with confidence is just one of the most amazing feelings a young athlete can experience. The skill of confidence is very delicate and is developed over time. The trick is *how* to develop confidence and *keep it*, despite some trying circumstances.

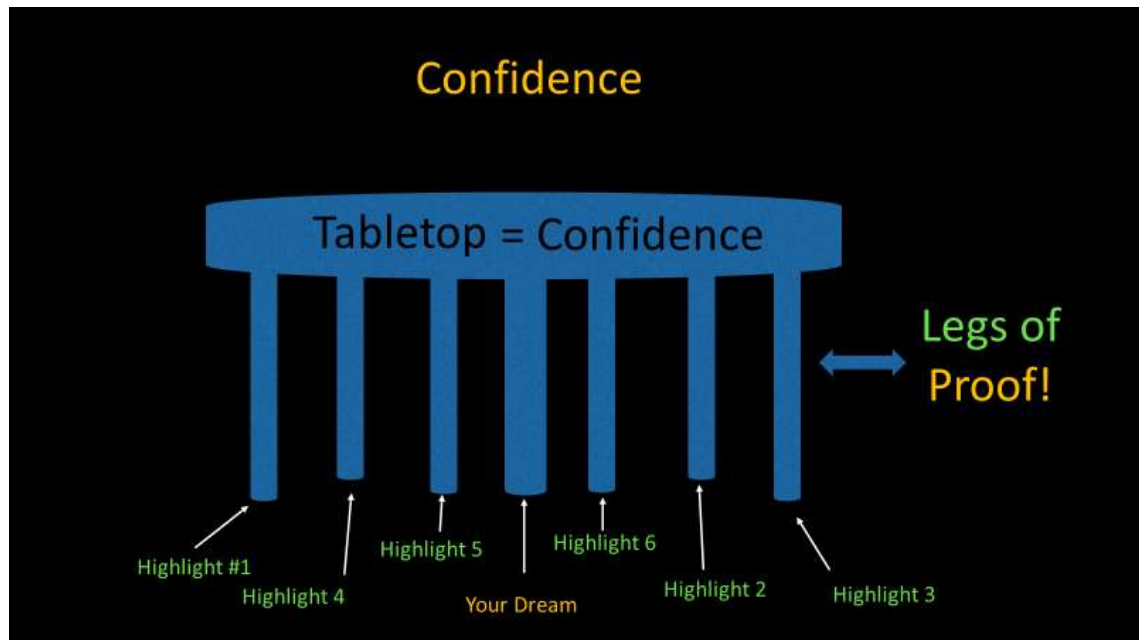
The truth is that confidence comes from within, it starts with our own unique talents, our experiences and how we view and respond to setbacks and challenges. This means that we produce our own confidence. Most athletes think if I can just play a couple of good games in a row, or have a few good practices I’ll be confident again. It doesn’t work that way! First you must build confidence within, then it begins to manifest on the outside. Here’s how to do this...

Your Highlight Reel

Why do you think at the end of a sports recap show they show what they call the ‘highlight of the night’ the ‘top plays of the week’ and at the end of the year they have the ‘top plays of the year’ in every sport? The reason is because it’s exciting. As fans we can’t wait to watch what was the #1 play and when we watch it it stirs up our positive emotions. Well this is how the mental-skills tool called the ‘Highlight Reel’ works. You’re going to put together your best ever sporting moments. Let me explain a little further.

Bear with me for just a moment as I make this comparison. Let's say a tabletop represents your level of confidence. If that table would only have one leg what would happen? Obviously, it would fall down, that's why no table has one leg. If we added a second leg now that table would be able to be balanced but it would be weak and unstable, easy to topple over. But if we added two more legs now that table with four legs is like almost every table we see. Four legs makes it stable and not easily toppled, but what if we added a few more legs, say three more, yes it would be an odd looking table but it would be extremely stable and very strong and heavy and consequently difficult to topple over. This is precisely how highlights work for your confidence.

The highlights act *like legs of proof* to your confidence level. It tells your brain I've done that before; I can do it again. It builds your confidence, makes it strong and steady and difficult to break. By the way, you've already built one leg of proof in an earlier chapter, you put together your dream/goal. Below you will see an illustration of how this works.



Like your dream, your highlight reel needs to be detailed so it conjures up the emotion you need to connect to for it to have a deep and lasting impact into your confidence psyche. Here's one of my examples,

When I was 12 years old, I remember playing the city semi-finals. I was one of the youngest players on my team. The score was tied 1-1 and the other team was constantly pressuring us. I remember being the only attacking player that was covered by two big

defenders. Suddenly, the ball came my way. I was racing to the ball against one of the defenders and got away from him with a perfect 1st touch that sent him going the other way, then the second defender raced to slide tackle me but I got by him by skipping the ball over him as I jumped over his legs. I was just past half and, on a breakaway, when I looked up and saw their goalie way too far from his net. The ball was bouncing a bit, so I quickly took a shot that went perfectly over his head and right in the middle of the net on one bounce. It was a fantastic goal, one of my best ever, that goal put us in the finals.

This play happened more than 35 years ago yet every time I tell it in my workshops a feeling warmth, happy, confident emotions runs through me. My brain tells me “Gad, you can do that again!” In reality, my current physical state wouldn’t let me do that but my brain is convinced by how it makes me feel that I could definitely do that again. This is the power of the highlight reel.

Homework:

Alright, your turn. In my opinion it should take you about 10 to 15 minutes to put together one strong highlight from your sporting past. Remember it has to be clear and detailed. You need to include as many senses as possible. Who’s there, what colours are on the uniform you’re wearing, break down the play that you did, what were the consequences etc. The brain likes detail, the more detail the more emotion it brings up and convinces the brain of your abilities. Ok, so start with your highlight #1, once finished you are going to

- A) Print it out, put it by your beside and read it once in the morning and once before going to bed, then,
- B) Within the next 2 weeks you will put together another 5 highlights so you will have 6 in total. All typed out on one or two (probably) pages, printed and beside your bed to read in the morning and evening.

Remember I joined the cross-country team to get better on my conditioning for soccer even though I hated it? Well for some of you this might be similar. You might not like this process of putting together your ‘highlight reel’ because it will take some time and effort, however, if you do and to the degree of detail necessary to be powerful legs of proof, it will be one of the most important mental skills tools you can ever do!

Building Your Confidence on specific areas.

Now that you have learned how to build your confidence from a general perspective, below you will see a 5-step plan to build confidence on a specific area and/or skill.

#1, Accept Failure — In order to get better at something, you will likely fail trying. I may sound like a broken record, but I promise that embracing this concept is key to gaining confidence.

#2, Easy Fix — Start with something easy. For example, if I want to get better at catching a tennis ball, I should start with tossing it just a few feet over my head. Once I succeed at regularly catching the ball at this height, I then begin to throw it a bit higher until I can catch it regularly at this height and so on. Success breeds confidence, so starting easy and then progressing is an important concept to follow. As a coach, that is a concept I follow every day at training. Every drill is started at the lowest possible level, and once success is achieved, I add a series of progressions to challenge my players and team accordingly.

#3, Imagine Your Success — Again, this is the power of Imagery/Visualization. Don't forget that your brain doesn't know the difference whether you're physically doing something or just imagining it. Therefore, before you start on something, picture it first, connect with the positive emotions it makes you feel, and then go and try it.

#4, Ask Others for Help — Young athletes shouldn't be shy. They should identify a teammate that they could confidently go to for advice. This person could also be a coach or a parent, but athletes should always be looking to get more feedback from many different channels.

#5, Be Kind to Yourself — Looking to improve at something can be frustrating at the best of times, therefore, be sure to encourage yourself. A lot of positive re-enforcement is important because at least you're trying which is a lot more than what others are probably doing, so, that alone should make you proud. Remember, positive self-talk could go a long way to helping you connect with those positive emotions.

Now that young know how to build your confidence, it's just as important to know what *kills* confidence. It's such a hard skill and emotional state to obtain, but unfortunately, it's so easy to lose. Therefore, all athletes need to be very aware of the things that will make them lose their confident state.

Confidence Killers

#1, *Negativity around you* — It comes in all shapes and sizes. This could be teammates that get on your case because a mistake happened, or it could be coaches that penalize a mistake by yelling or taking a player out or benching an athlete. Even as parents, our body language

communicates a lot when our child does something wrong, as well as how we talk to them on the way home.

Athletes need to get into the habit of letting things slide off their back. Just like a duck in water, when the duck's head pops out of the water you see the water just slide from the neck down the back, right back into the pond; that's what young athletes need to learn to do (can anyone say – REFRAMING!). Yes, learn what you can with the feedback you are getting, but if that feedback is just negativity (being berated by coach and/or parents), no good can come out of that, so it's best to respectfully ignore this.

If you're a parent reading this, we need to be very careful of what we say to our child. A young athlete needs to fix the ending of the mental book of that experience and move on. Even when things are going great, the negativity can come in the way of jealousy from competitors or even teammates. I realize this point is easier said than done, but an athlete needs to be disciplined in order to ignore the negativity around them so that they can move to the next level of their development. Negativity will always be a part of an athlete's environment, so the best thing you can do as a parent is help your child recognize when negativity occurs and keep a check on your own body language when communicating with your child.

#2, *Language You Use* — So, just as we placed the importance on 'positive' self-talk for your mental game development, the 'negative' self-talk needs to be addressed just as much. An athlete needs to be quick to catch their evil mini-me, the voice in his/her head that is always ready to tell them all the bad things they have done or not done. It's going to be hard enough make it to where they want to go, so athletes can't allow themselves to be another barrier to that goal. An athlete needs to quickly catch their negative self-talk and change it to positive self-talk, to change the ending of that book (experience) and store that in the brain's library in the positive section for future reference.

#3, *Worry about things you have no control over* — As I have mentioned before, there are only so many variables an athlete has control over, so it's important that the focus remains on the controllable factors and nothing else. Situations and circumstances an athlete can't control will always be there, so either as an athlete you accept this and move on or else you will have a very difficult time enjoying the process and building confidence.

#4, *Perfectionism* — If imagery was my best mental game trait, then perfectionism was my worst. Young, talented athletes are use to good things happening to them in competition, as well as the accolades they receive away from the court/gym/field. As soon as things don't go the way as planned or some adversity happens, then they begin to doubt, be afraid, or even

feel angered. Well, we've talked enough about the power of failure, but it is much easier to say something it's totally different to do as we say. If an athlete expects (we'll talk about expectations a little later) a good or perfect performance regularly they are going to be disappointed more often than not, which will lead to 'negative' self-talk, bad emotional state, diminished confidence etc. Focus on what you can control, and the rest will take care of itself.

#5, *Worry what others say* — This is similar to Confidence Killer #1, but it actually doesn't have to be negative; it could also be the positive expectations that others have of a young athlete. Often, these positive comments can put pressure on the athlete to achieve this level of performance on a regular basis. Coaches could say, "Come on David, our team depends on you, you're our best player. We need you to score!" Or they could say, "Others can make those mistakes but not you!" It could also come from parents, "Honey, you're great, but you need to defeat her to get ranked higher".

Opponents will at times trash-talk an athlete. Therefore, an athlete needs to be disciplined enough to ignore the chatter and focus (remember the one-minute focus drill) on what they need to do to succeed.

#6, *Expectations (Outcome focused thinking)* — I believe this is the worst of them all, because it can literally take a young athlete who is progressing nicely to a state of negativity and false reality. This is such a concern for me that the next chapter is completely dedicated to it.

Homework

Complete 6 highlights of your young athletic career within the next two-weeks. Make sure it highlights is detailed. Then print these highlights have it by your bedside and read it once in the morning and once in the evening.

Chapter 10: Expectations Are Bad!

*“Sometimes we create our own
heartbreaks through expectation.”*

— *Anonymous*

Changing the Mindset

Expectations as a starting point are fine, but I prefer to use the word *goal*. The problem with expectations is that we already know that there are so many variables out of any athlete’s control, therefore, by expecting a certain result, athletes can put unnecessary pressure on themselves.

Let’s start by watching a video on YouTube called, “[Process over Outcome – The Mindset of Michael Phelps](#).” Although the video starts a little slow, be patient. When Bob Costas, the famous sports broadcaster, starts interviewing Olympic legend Michael Phelps, what you hear is going to be gold. Most importantly, pay attention to how they use the phrase *outcome focused thinking*, instead of the word *expectation*. Go ahead and watch the video now.

In the video, Bob Costas asks Michael Phelps if in his last race (he was going to retire) in the Rio Olympics he doesn’t finish with a gold medal, especially considering the fifty-metre fly was his strongest event, would that haunt him forever? Michael’s reply is the epitome of the theory of not focusing on the outcome or expecting a certain result but to focus on the process instead. Phelps tells Costas that he wouldn’t be haunted because he could look back and realize that he and his coach (interesting how he catches himself and includes his coach!) did everything they could do, to be the best and hopefully win the race. When Michael talks about everything they could do, he means everything that was in their control. That’s all they can ask of themselves.

Michael’s reply epitomizes the theory that we need to focus on the process, rather than the outcome or result. Therefore, knowing that he focused on the controllable factors and put in the commitment level and hard work (body and mind) necessary to be successful, Phelps said he would have peace of mind, even though he might be a little upset at the end of the race.

Again, how I wish someone would have taught me this mental game principal growing up! Even though I accomplished a lot and played professionally, at times I really didn’t enjoy the ride. I even felt that I was not at peace because deep down inside I had certain expectations of my career, which I believed I clearly wasn’t fulfilling. When I retired at the age of 29 because

of post-concussion symptoms, I had an identity crisis. This identity crisis and inner anguish of not reaching expectations threw me into a state of depression.

One of my strategies I used to overcome my depression was to learn what I could about the brain as I knew part of my emotional state was connected to my previous brain injuries. I spent countless hours in the library reading, and I really began to understand the power of the mind and specifically the influence it has on 'athletic performance, otherwise known as *success psychology*.

I slowly began to understand that, at the end of the day, I did everything I could within my power to reach my goals. No one could ever accuse me of skipping practices (commitment), not training hard, of not having big detailed dreams, of not totally submerging myself to what I wanted to achieve. With time, I grew to appreciate what I had accomplished and slowly began to have peace of mind with how everything turned out. I just wish someone would've taught me this as I was playing.

Understanding this principal not only would have helped me enjoy myself and appreciate the talent and opportunity I was given, but it would have changed some decisions that I made, as well as some training strategies and plans that would have surely spear-headed my rate of growth and brought me to a higher level of performance. I am convinced of this.

This revelation is one of the reasons why I went into teaching success psychology. I believe it's a game-changer for all athletes and the younger the better. To this day I can't believe I was never taught this as a high-performance athlete.

All athletes (young and old) need to appreciate their opportunity, they need to understand that not many people get their lot in life, and when you have big goals and dreams, you cannot leave any cards (mental strength) on the table in terms of preparation.

To summarize, expectations are *wants, needs or should've*. For example: I *should* win this competition, or we *should* beat the last place team. This sucks the life out of confidence because it causes you to continually judge yourself. This is an issue, since with time, eventually everyone will fall short somewhere. Another problem is that there's usually no plan associated with expectations. Therefore, expectations hurt you and are bad for your athletic development.

The solution to this dilemma is what is called *process goals*. Process goals help you keep focused on the plan and are tasks specific on the things you control. These goals keep you in the now, as opposed to dreaming too often into the future.

When an athlete has a goal far out into the future, it may seem at times overwhelming. This can make the athlete feel that their goal is not attainable at times or it can cause the athlete to make decisions that are not in his/her best interest, such as returning from injury to early, overdoing it in the weight room and then getting hurt, or assuming a lack of playing time is going to be fatal leading to a change in teams and/or organizations.

Process goals act like steps to get you towards the end goal. These steps can be broken down into monthly, quarterly, yearly or athletic season goals and it becomes a personal training plan to move you forward intelligently.

For example, an athlete could have:

- 1) Yearly performance goal to be selected to the all-star team.
- 2) Monthly performance goals to improve lower body strength, be more focused and confident, and improve the accuracy of his/her shot.

By keeping focused on these process goals, an athlete does not go into worrying about immediate results and circumstances. They keep their noses firmly grounded to what they can control and work the plan and before they know it, they've improved on so many facets of their performance (physical and mental) that they are getting closer and closer to their end goal.

Activity: Turning Expectations into Process Goals

When I do this activity with my athletes and/or teams, it's clear to me that although they are learning and growing mentally, it still hasn't all sunk in terms of their natural thinking patterns. For example, I ask them, "Before your competition what do you expect?"

Those in team sports universally say they expect to win, while others in individual sports will say I expect to finish top 3 or win the whole event. Again, in theory, it's not a bad goal to have, but in reality, we already have talked at nauseum as to how so many variables are out of our control. Therefore, our thoughts and focus should not be at winning or finishing in a certain spot, but rather on the things we control and need to do, to have a good chance of getting those results.

Let's go through an example,

Expectations:

Again, most athletes would say that when competing they expect to win and/or expect themselves to score and help their team win or something to that affect.

Once they have given me this or a similar answer, I ask them what is wrong with having these expectations and a majority (because of the training thus far) will say, “The problem is I can’t control my teammates or the referee’s calls,” as an example.

If they don’t give this answer, then I slowly lead them toward it and explain that they can have their best game ever, but if the referee makes a bad call that leads to the other team scoring, or they can do their best but if their teammates can’t score there’s a chance they will not win the game. However, that doesn’t mean they didn’t perform well.

With this example, having the expectation to win will probably leave them feeling disappointment and possibly defeated, which is the totally wrong emotional state to finish with. Having a focus on the process goals will allow them to turn their emotion of disappointment into peace of mind and satisfaction that they put in the work to achieve and personally did all they could do!

Let’s turn those expectations into process goals. Since we know we can’t control many aspects of competition that leads to the results, we need to focus on those factors we have 100% control. This will give an athlete the best chance for success, therefore, what can you (the athlete) control? At this point, we’ve gone through this a few times, therefore I’m hoping you have a good idea of what it is you can control. When I work with athletes, I get answers like my warmup, my pregame meal, my thinking etc., which are all correct. So, let’s get specific here.

Yes you can control your physical readiness, therefore your process goals here need to be: make sure you have a good rest the night before a game, focus on your nutrition (write out a plan if possible), make sure you arrive early to do your physical warm-up. From a thinking standpoint, your process goals could be: doing your centred-breathing technique on the way to competition, as your changing and/or during the game. You can give yourself a pep-talk and you can visualize how you see the game turning out. These are things you have 100% control over and if you do them then you give yourself the best opportunity to have the outcome you want! This is how process goals help you keep focused on the right things!

Again, expectations to achieve something is very dangerous because you can’t control most things and if you don’t achieve those expectations you will be disappointed even though it was out of your hands.

Homework: Put together a plan (process goals) of what you can do to prepare for your next competition and make sure you do it!

Chapter 11 – Parent’s Guide to Helping Their Child

*“Children take more notice of what their
Parents do than what they say.”
— William Tiptaft*

Parents are the Glue

By getting this far, I am assuming one of two scenarios have taken place.

One, you have gone through the book with your child and introduced this mental-toughness coaching program, which I’m confident will help build their mental strength. If this is the case, congratulations. Regardless of how you feel it went, just know that getting your child to go through this process is not an easy feat.

The second scenario could be that you tried your best to get your child to go through this training and, for whatever reason, it just didn’t work out. Well, you are not the first, and you won’t be the last. Let’s reframe the situation by stating some realities. Firstly, it’s not easy to coach or force a book on one’s own child, for which I have personal experience. Secondly, as a parent, you were proactive in trying to help your child achieve his/her athletic goal, and the first time is never perfect. It takes a few runs at it for the information to sink in and really be effective.

What I truly hope has happened now is that you (parent) are also reaping the rewards of my, *Mental Toughness Coaching*, program. That, as you have read this book, you’ve gotten a clearer understanding of the vital role our mind plays in achievement. As an example, you now know that the *Four Keys to Thinking Like a Champion* are foundational to changing an athlete’s thinking patterns.

I hope you have also benefited from the six Mental Game Tools that train and/or retrain our brain in terms of recognizing where the right decisions are coming from. Yes, this is a book to help your athlete achieve, but you can also take these same principals and apply it to your life as well. This is important moving forward because what matters now is that, as a parent, you always remain a positive influence on your child’s development at home and at the arena, field, gym or wherever the competition may be.

I've seen repeatedly how parents struggle to keep their own emotions in check on the side-lines or hear about how they act in the car on the way home after a game. If we as parents act like this how could we possibly expect our child to behave any differently?

Your child has enough challenges to face and many more barriers to overcome in their personal athletic journey. What they need from you is a calm presence and emotional stability, which they could turn to for support and love. Your child needs to know that no matter what happens in the competitive arena, he/she can turn to you, and you'll be there to support with a hug, a smile, a shoulder to lean on, some thoughtful words or maybe even sharing some mutual tears. They need to know that you'll be there to put some perspective on the situation and be the platform to reset for the next challenge.

So yes, as much as you have been a conduit of this mental toughness coaching program for your child, keep in mind your number one role is that of a parent. You are a parent with some mental toughness training (since you've read this book) who can help your child overcome disappointments by reframing a situation or using any other tools that you are now familiar with.

You see, young athletes are always at the mercy of their coach in terms of decision-making. Will they start a game, will they play a lot, will they get yelled at if they make a mistake? Their emotions go up and down like a roller coaster, so they don't need this from a parent as well.

You need to be emotionally stable, which I know is easier said than done. I've been there, and I don't know if there is anything more emotionally draining than being a parent of a goaltender in any sport (but hockey might be the worse of them all). Hockey goalies have a lot of action going on around the net quite frequently, and that little black puck just seems to take crazy bounces! I remember that on more than one occasion, I was just ready to lash out at the referees for not blowing the whistle quickly, for not calling a penalty on a player who (in my opinion) crashed into the goalie, my son, on purpose. However, I had that little voice (my positive mini-me) in the back of my head always reminding me of what I teach and how would this look if I don't practice what I preach.

You can train your positive mini-me to be active at your child's competitions and to keep you emotionally stable and grounded, so your child takes the cue from you and remains focused on the factors that he/she can control.

Also, when speaking about controllable factors, parents need to focus on providing your child with positive re-enforcement in terms of the effort given and not the results. Since you've

gone through this book you already know why this is important but let's quickly go through it again. After any competition, I think that the most important thing to do is praise your child's effort. Often times, after an unfavorable result, many coaches tell their players something to the effect, "You didn't want it badly enough!" or, "The other team/person wanted it more than you did!" This is usually a meaningless and counterproductive statement, as I can assure you 99.9% of high-performance athletes want success just as much as their counterparts.

This type of messaging is not only confusing but can be downright demoralizing. Therefore, what your child needs from you is positive feedback—what did go right, what worked, what did you like? Once you have done this, your child will be much more open to the constructive feedback that you feel might help improve performance.

At the end of the day, I think we can all agree that being a parent is the toughest job in the world and being a parent of a young athlete can be gut-wrenching at times. We feel helpless when we see our child struggle. Although we have good intentions, sometimes our emotions make us impulsive, and we say things that come out wrong. This can wreak havoc on the child-parent relationship. Therefore, as parents, we need to be the stable emotional force, the rock that holds your child together during their journey. Hopefully, having gone through this book and its simple step-by-step guide to mental toughness, you feel a lot more empowered and prepared to do so.

Chapter 12: Conclusion

“Do you want to win? Then get tough, mentally tough.

It takes more than muscle, more than practice

More than sheer determination to get to the top.

It Takes the Mind of a Champion!”

— Anonymous

Mentorship

When I wrote this book, I wanted it to be as though I was there with you throughout the process, helping you athlete and/or parent in this exciting but challenging athletic journey. I understand I'm limited by how many people I can help one-on-one, so my goal was to empower you, to learn and use this proven and practical program. I have given you all the tools you need to shift and reprogram the mind so any athlete can have the ability to turn anxiety, doubt and frustration into confidence, focus and resiliency. With the added benefit that you can use this life-skill in and out of the athletic arena.

As a quick review, I'll walk you through what we've covered thus far.

First, we started by discussing scientifically backed research that shows, without at doubt the importance the mind plays in performance. These results are what I call the Mental Game Foundations, which include the Three Pillars of Success and the Four Keys to Thinking Like a Champion. These are all undeniable realities to thinking and performance, which an athlete needs to understand before diving into practical brain training.

Then, I discussed the elements of success and what that really looks like. In performance, having strong dreams and goals are only as important as having a clear understanding and perspective of what success ultimately means. Emotional stability is also another undeniable factor for maximizing development.

Next, I touched on the importance of the concept of team and teamwork for everyone's personal achievement and goals. Whether your child plays a team sport or an individual one, the idea is the same: no great achievement in life has ever been done alone. Every great athlete has always had a person or people on their side to provide help, training, coaching, and support. The concept is that we can do much more with others than by ourselves.

Next were the six Mental Game Tools that any athlete can train and implement immediately to start changing their thinking, which will change their emotions and ultimately

change their behaviour. These tools build on one another, so by the end, an athlete has a mental toughness plan, which they can draw from to address a specific area of concern and to continue to develop and be mentally tough.

Finally, we touched on the parent(s)'s role in an athlete's development. My hardest coaching job by far has been coaching my children in their youth sports, and that's because of that emotional connection. With this book, my thought is to somewhat keep that connection at arm's length by using me as that space between you and your child to get them to commit to training their brain. I hope this has worked, but even if you feel it hasn't, I'm confident to say you are probably in a much better spot now than you were before you picked up this book. Let me explain...

The worst-case scenario is that you tried to get your child to work with you through the book, but for whatever reason, it didn't work. Maybe he/she was not interested? Maybe he/she found the material uninspiring, or the dynamic between the two of you just didn't work? This is not unusual. Remember that training the mind is intangible, especially for young athletes, so the perceived benefit for them is not very clear, hence the lack of commitment from many.

The big silver lining is that, by reading this book, you and/or your athlete both have a much better perspective on understanding what might be going inside the mind. It should also help towards having a much more comfortable parent/athlete relationship both emotionally and verbally.

When, parents, control themselves and have a better understanding of what might be happening psychologically to their athlete, we become part of the winning team your child needs around them to succeed. Too often, parents are more part of the problem than the solution, despite our good intentions (I include myself in this).

Remember, an athlete's journey is their own. Regardless of whether you had a similar experience in your youth or not. Everyone's mindset is different, but the key is knowing that every athlete's mind needs (more like has) to be addressed and trained to maximize potential. If left on its own, the mind can be a source of constant challenge and frustration. And when performance is not as expected, the mind becomes the biggest enemy of getting back on track and changing the results.

This leads to anger, frustration, and sheer lack of enjoyment. Worst yet, it can be a source of a soured child-parent relationship, despite our best intentions. Let's keep in mind that this athletic journey is a marathon, not a sprint. Adjustments need to be made along the way to win the race.

By you parent or athlete taking the step of reading this book, you have made the biggest and best adjustment you could have made. This book has the power to change any athlete's mindset, to produce new success thinking patterns, by resetting old limiting-beliefs. The goal is to train an athlete's brain so that they can make more productive decisions—decisions that increase confidence, help keep them focused, make them resilient against the toughest of situations, help them get the most out of all the skills and physical training they do, and help them enjoy their journey a lot more.

The result is a more emotionally healthy young athlete and a healthier child-parent relationship, which, at the end of the day, is what we all want.

I told you about my own unique experience as a young athlete; about how all seemed fine on the surface, but underneath were all the emotional and psychological challenges I was facing. These subconscious challenges were the source of constant anger and frustration, which ultimately limited me from enjoying to the fullest extent what should have been one of the most wonderful times of my life. This struggle has been the catalyst of what I do now and ultimately why I wrote this book, the contents of which have helped thousands of young athletes conquer the unique challenges of their personal athletic journey.

My 'Mental Toughness Coaching' (MTC) program was laid out in an easy to follow, step-by-step format with simple but effective activities. The result the athlete or parent that has read this has a bunch of 'mental game tools' they can pull from whenever they need to and can continue to develop and be mentally tough in all areas of life!

I have been very detailed throughout the book so as to make sure I provide you with the same program I provide my private clients. However, I realize everyone's situation is unique, therefore I urge you to take advantage of your free 30-minute 1-on-1 session with me (\$150value). You can book it by visiting <https://calendly.com/coachgad/1on1>

Enjoy your journey!

Acknowledgments

When you have a dream early in life that's so powerful it consumes you, I can only assume it comes from a higher source. I want to thank this higher source, power, God, for this has pushed me to no end.

As you pursue this dream, many people are important because of their love, support, and dedication. My parents have shown me the amazing power of dreaming and hard work. As a young couple with a one-year-old in their arms, they made their way to a foreign land to pursue a better life. Their work ethic and focus through the years couldn't help but become ingrained in me and is a huge part of my success. I want to thank my dad, Ricardo, who only stopped working to drive to me to my practices and games and who continues to remind me that because of me he drove his Chevy Nova to the ground.

To my mom, Luz, thank you for being a strong emotional and moral support, for never standing in my way of pursuing my dreams. I will never forget, the day I left home at age seventeen, you stood at the door as I departed to the airport and said, as you fought back the tears, "Son you're leaving home way too young, but what can I do?" I knew that as I hugged you and walked away, I was going to work to pursue my dreams for you, just as much as for me.

A huge thank you to my kids Nicole and Elias, whom were the reason I reset myself and my career. You inspire me to continue to learn, improve, and work hard. To my wife, Jenny, who has been through most of the ups and downs along the way with me, thanks for always supporting me and giving me the confidence and love I needed along the way.

To my former coaches and teammates, thank you as no one can achieve anything without the help of others.

A big thank you to all my competitors, adversaries, and foes, as one cannot fully develop to one's potential without the challenge you provide, the challenge to face you, to overcome and to continue to pursue excellence!

And finally, a big thank you to someone I've never met and who doesn't even know I exist! His name is Gary Vaynerchuk. Gary is a well-known businessman and speaker who unselfishly provides practical honest advice for those that want to make a difference, because of him the idea of writing this book became a reality. Maybe one day I will be able to shake your hand and thank you personally.

About the Author



Gad Espinosa is a certified High-Performance Mental Skills Coach, an author, and speaker who has been interviewed in numerous newspapers and radio shows. He has spent the last two decades of his career coaching thousands of young athletes and helping them discover mental strength breakthroughs that allow them to maximize their development, so they can take their game to another level and fulfill their athletic potential.

As a former professional athlete who has represented his country internationally, he knows first-hand the psychological and emotional challenges experienced by athletes. As a parent of two former-competitive athletes, he knows the difficulty of raising athletes. And, as a university varsity head coach, he sympathizes with coaches and their responsibilities.

He has been privileged to train and mentor athletes at all levels, from those just starting their athletic careers to others who have gone on to represent their country and succeed at World Championships and Olympic games.

Gad is excited to bring his proven Mental Toughness Coaching (MTC) program, into the public world, through this book, seminars, online courses and speaking engagements. He currently resides in Toronto, Canada. He loves spending time with his family and enjoys dancing, reading and engaging in some outdoor sports.

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Thank You!

Hello, and thank you for reading *How Do I Improve My Kid's Athletic Performance*. This isn't the end but rather the beginning of a life-changing and worthwhile future. I sincerely hope this book has provided you and more specifically your athlete with peace of mind, encouragement, and confidence to take this *Roadmap to Success*!

I want mental toughness training to become a natural part of every athlete's regular routine. To make that happen, I'm providing a special offer to all the readers of this book. A FREE 'mental toughness' 1-on-1 assessment session with me --- a \$150 value.

To enroll in this free session, visit: visiting <https://calendly.com/coachgad/1on1>

If you have any questions, feel free to reach out. You can send an email to me at coachgad10@gmail.com. Feel free to also visit my website: www.coachgad.com