Mental Toughness For Power Sports

John Doe, a seasoned power lifter is at a major competition. On his first attempt on the squat, he has an unusual experience where he loses his balance and he falls backward a little bit, but it is enough to ruin his first attempt. More than anything, he is in a state of shock... "How could this happen to me? What the *%*@@ is wrong with me?"

John proceeded to miss his next two attempts and does not progress to the bench press. After the competition, John stated he was not able to let go of the mistake, he “beat” himself up relentlessly and never forgave himself for the mistake. Thus, his emotions and lack of focus caused him to beat himself. And when an athlete beats himself up, the frustration is sure to follow. The mentally tough competitor is the one who has something to go to when the “garbage hits the fan.” He is not surprised by adversity, but he recognizes it is part of performance and he is prepared to deal with it. An intricate part of his preparation is that he has practiced dealing with adversity.

In the past 50 years, one of the most high performance programs in the United States has been the space program and the training of astronauts. I encourage athletes to watch the movie Apollo 13, because one thing that is shown as an intricate part of an astronaut’s training is the use of the simulator. The simulator is where they practice handling adversity so when it hits they are confident in their ability to handle it since they had practiced so long in adverse situations. It is not enough to just "think" positive thoughts about their performance. If one practices dealing with adversity, it will help build confidence because the athlete is prepared to deal with it.
What is Mental Toughness?

Mental Toughness is what it takes to perform in the competitive arena. In my 25 years of work with professional and Olympic athletes I have discovered that peak performance is not about being in the “zone” but in learning to compensate and adjust. I encourage athletes to do everything they can to be in the most effective performance state, where they are totally locked in, absorbed and fully focused, but that type of mindset is not always going to be obtained.

Mentally tough performers are prepared to deal with adversity, and they know how to make the most of difficult situations. For example, a sprinter must deal with false starts, weather conditions, other competitors and or delays. Competition is not always fair, right or just, but the athlete must learn to cope with it. As Lou Pinella, the Seattle Mariners manager explains when discussing a mentally tough competitor, “He’ll never be a tough competitor, he doesn’t know how to get comfortable with being uncomfortable.” Learning to be comfortable with feeling uncomfortable is a key to mental toughness.

In any competition the performer needs to do what it takes to feel as good as one can, but at a certain point that performer must not focus on how he or she feels, but trust his or her preparation and do what he/she is capable of doing on that given day. Because when they post the final scores no one cares how you felt, they just want to know the results.

Practice is Critical.
When I first began my work in Performance Enhancement the majority of my time was focused on “National Championships.” Today the majority of my work is focused on practice & training. Like the astronauts, I want the athlete to practice compensation and adjustment so that when adversity strikes the athlete is prepared to deal with it effectively. For example, in doing a snatch the goal is to get the bar from the floor to the catch position in a balanced position, but the performer must practice learning to compensate when one is not totally balanced. This allows the performer’s kinesthetic sense and muscles to adapt to the needed adjustments. And you will not be able to do this when the pressure is on unless you practice it in training.

I am always telling athletes to learn to have "good bad days" in competition. So you don’t feel good or you had a tough day at work, make the most of what you got. If you only have 70%, focus on the 70% you have rather than dwelling on the 30% that is missing. Give 100% of what you do have.

An additional reason why practice is so important is because when it comes time to perform, all you can ask of yourself is to perform the way you have been practicing. I have been involved in six Olympic games and one thing that I have learned from athletes that perform well is that they often approach that BIG competition, like another practice. They do what they do. Many athletes, who try to perform to the max, tighten up and do not achieve their goal. This is difficult in a power sport where maximal exertion is critical, but to get maximum force there must be a controlled intensity and/or relaxed concentration, because when the performer has that relaxed concentration there is a feeling of control and the body is able to perform more efficiently.
Of course, the underlying assumption of approaching the big performance like practice necessitates increasing the quality of practice by being more intense and focused in the practice. And by having the "good bad days" that we discussed earlier.

Responsibility is the foundation of mental toughness. In my work with athletes, I approach responsibility like a technical skill. Responsibility impacts mental toughness in two major ways. First, as an elite athlete, you don't have control of what goes on around you, but you do have total control of how you choose to respond to it. There are so many things in competition that you don't have control of, for example, the judges, starting times, other competitors etc. But you do have control of your attitude and effort in dealing with the distractions. As one 10 year old athlete said to me so clearly "Ken, what you mean is that Attitude is a Decision."

The second way that responsibility impacts mental toughness is that as an athlete, you must be in control of yourself before you can control your performance. When an athlete is emotionally out of control or not properly focused, it impacts the execution of the skills needed to perform. Thus, self-control leads to body control, which leads to technique control. So often in athletics everything is fixed with mechanics, technique & working harder, but sometimes the athlete needs to make an adjustment in the mindset. The solution is generally not just working harder, but working the proper way.

Self-regulation: the 5R’s:

Once the athlete takes responsibility for the performance, the next step is to take control of oneself so that the athlete can be consistent and balanced as he or she performs. Recognition is a critical first step; athletes must regulate their intensity. This requires that they know how aroused or intense they need to be to perform to their potential. I use
the analogy of athletic performance like driving a car. When you come to a signal light, the driver must first be aware that there is a signal light and if the light is green, then go. But if the light is yellow, the driver must become more conscious and check the intersection and one’s rear view mirror for a police officer and then make a decision. And if the light is red, stop. What often happens in athletic performance, is that the athlete drives through a few yellow lights, for example, rushes to the competition, gets upset by a poor warm-up, worries about things out of one’s control, and this takes the focus off what one has control of and the performance gradually goes downhill.

Thus, the athlete must recognize his or her signal lights so that he or she can tell when he or she is too aroused or losing the proper focus and intervene at the early stage before it gets totally out of control. After the athlete recognizes where he or she is at the next step is to release any negative thoughts, or in the case of John Doe let go of that terrible first attempt to get ready for the next attempt. The performer must segment the last attempt from this attempt. This involves recognizing what happened, learning from it, forgiving oneself, and focusing on the next one.

The third R is regroup. After you release the last attempt, get yourself ready for the next one. This requires that the athlete center and balance oneself or as I tell athletes “Stand Tall” which means get yourself together before you make your next attempt. Mentally tough athletes know how to carry themselves; their body language and approach is consistent regardless of how well they are performing. Anyone can be mentally tough when they are performing well, but the truly mentally tough athletes know how to carry themselves when things are not going well. And as discussed earlier, if you expect to do this in the competitive arena you must practice it in training. Once the athlete is in
control of one's self, he or she can then refocus on the task at hand. What do I need to do? This is where the attention must be directed; what are the task relevant cues that must be focused on to perform.

This type of mindset is what results in clear and effective thinking. It also will aid in creating that controlled intensity rather than reckless abandonment in the next execution. Most importantly when the athlete is clear, focused and has that controlled intensity it is easier to re-establish that belief and commitment needed to perform effectively. I want to emphasize the controlled intensity, I mean a passion, belief and commitment to what one is about to do. In power sports this is critical, because if the performer is out of control and just pushing to the absolute max it may do more harm than good.

The final step is to respond. This means you are prepared, in control, have a clear plan and it is at this point you totally connect to the task at hand and TRUST yourself in the execution of the skill. And this is where you have to be in control of yourself to let go of control and emerge yourself in the task at hand.

All of this sounds so simple as you read the article but in order to perform when the pressure is on you have to train with a similar mindset. Practice your recognitions, releasing, regrouping, refocusing and responding skills so when adversity hits you have something to go to. Bring on the Adversity!