The Psychology of High-Performance Track and Field

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Chapter 4

QUALITY PRACTICE AND TRAINING

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The starter calls you to the line. In the moments leading up to the start, two important questions come to mind: Am I fast enough to win, and has my preparation given me the best chance to perform to my potential? You cannot do anything in regard to the first question, but you can be completely responsible for the second. Perhaps no factor is as important to performance excellence as the quality of one’s practice and training regimen. Talent and genetic attributes are certainly key determinants of performance; however these components are completely outside of one’s control. You cannot decide to be taller or have more fast-twitch muscle fibers, but you can choose to practice consistently with a high degree of quality. You can decide what it truly means to be ready and take the necessary steps to get there.

While the track meet may begin on Friday or Saturday, the real competition begins at practice during the weeks leading up to the meet. The competition is with one’s self. The challenge is to get the most out of each practice that is possible for that day. Forget about having the goal to give 110% each day. You will have many days when your body will not be at its best. Having a quality practice means that you will get the most out of what you can give to practice. If you are only feeling 70% of how you feel on a good day, are you getting 100% out of that 70% you have to give?

At comparable levels of performance, the amount of practice and training engaged in is relatively consistent among the competitors. The middle distance runners are all running about the same number of miles each week, the throwers and jumpers are all getting in about the same number of attempts in practice, and in the weight room all the athletes are doing relatively similar workouts. Attaining the competitive edge will not come from quantity of training but from the quality of the training. Quality practice is not about just working hard. If one trains too hard for too long, overtraining and injury will likely occur. To be fully prepared is to be ready to deal with the worst possible conditions and circumstances imaginable. Quality practice is about preparing yourself for performance conditions and doing things that will maximize your chances to perform up to your full potential when adversity strikes. Even though you can’t prepare for every situation you will at least be prepared for the vast majority of different situations.

The training that astronauts go through provides a great model for what quality practice is. Their attention to detail is critical for the success and safety of the mission. During their training, astronauts go over every conceivable contingency and both plan for and practice for those contingencies occurring. With regard to everything that is in their control, nothing is left to chance. By launch time, the astronauts have prepared for almost every possible occurrence. In contrast, many athletes prepare only for ideal conditions. Thus when the conditions are not ideal, which is often the case, they are unprepared to deal with them. They get anxious and keyed up when they don’t feel right. When the legs feel heavy or the equipment doesn’t feel right during meets, many athletes have not prepared to deal appropriately with these issues. When the legs feel heavy and your equipment doesn’t feel right, will you be surprised by adversity instead of being prepared for it?

WHY QUALITY PRACTICE IS IMPORTANT

1. When athletes compete in track meets, especially major competitions, their bodies will respond in the way they were trained to perform. Increases in arousal level tend to elicit the athlete’s dominant responses. These responses are dominant because they have been repeated and learned to such a degree that in times of high stress they occur automatically. During practice sessions when the mind is not focused on specific tasks, the execution of these responses may not specifically match the ideal response desired during competition and may become sloppy. If this occurs regularly, those flaws in execution will most likely materialize during crucial moments of competition. For example, if a shot putter does not hold the finish during practice and steps out of the ring early, then during high level
competition he or she may not be able to hold the finish, and will end up fouling more often. When an athlete practices the correct responses consistently, such as holding the finish, those responses will most likely emerge in competition. Quality practice demands that the repetitions executed in practice match the repetitions desired during competition.

2. Quality practice is important because it is the most influential predictor of performance that the athlete can control. Engagement in quality practice is a decision. When an athlete toes the line of a race, he or she cannot do anything about the track conditions, the weather, or the caliber of the competition, but he or she can control the quality of the practice sessions leading up to the race.

3. Every athlete agrees that confidence is absolutely essential for maximizing one’s potential. While confidence can certainly come from past results, it can also emerge out of the things done during practice. The difference is that performance results cannot be controlled and are often inconsistent while practice quality is something that can be controlled and consistent. Confidence based upon repeated quality practice sessions leading up to an event can be more enduring and powerful than confidence based upon results.

4. Perhaps the truest measure of greatness for athletes is how they perform when the competitive situation is far less than optimal. Confronting and dealing with adversity is a fundamental aspect of quality practice. During these practices athletes develop tangible strategies to go to when adversity appears. These strategies include getting one’s focus back on the breath, developing a routine, having a focal point, and sticking to basic fundamentals. Quality practice provides the athlete with something they can go to when the competitive situation becomes challenging.

5. Great performers practice performing great. There is no guarantee that if you practice with quality you will perform flawlessly. All you can do as an athlete is look for ways to stack the deck in your favor. With each quality repetition and practice completed, you increase the odds that your full potential will come out during competition.

6. A final reason quality practice is important is that there are not enough meets in which to hone your performance skills. If however, you take one or two repetitions in practice and imagine them as competition attempts, you are providing yourself great opportunities to enhance your performing skills. This includes using your full routine to make it as “meet-like” as possible. Then when the actual meet takes place you feel that much more prepared and comfortable to perform.

The general purpose of practice is to prepare the athlete to perform at his or her fullest potential in competition. The specific purposes of each practice may address various areas associated with performance. The three primary areas addressed at practice are physical training, technical skills, and competitive simulation. Physical training includes working on your level of fitness, strength, flexibility, balance, and endurance. Technical skills are the biomechanical elements specific to the events. Competitive simulation includes decision-making, situation assessment, dealing with adversity, waiting, and strategy selection.

Mental skills are the skills that optimize the effectiveness of the physical training, technical skills, and competitive simulation (Figure 1). One cannot separate the mental from the physical. Changes in one’s mental state are often associated with changes in one’s physical state, and we know how changes in one’s performance can have a direct impact on one’s mental state. If an athlete produces a negative image of performance, then an increase in muscle tension will most likely accompany the image.

The disconnection between the mental and physical often occurs at practice when athletes execute skills mindlessly. During quality practice, repeated skills are executed with mindfulness. Mental skills consist of refocusing, awareness, confidence, mental toughness, imagery, and self-regulation. For example, a high jumper who has failed to make a height on the first two of three jumps must work at being able to make adjustments and turn it around by the third jump or be out of the competition. The skills required to turn it around must be
practiced if one is to be fully prepared for competition.

When mental skills are integrated into practice, the enhancement of the physical, technical, and competitive skills are maximized. Mental skills provide the necessary groundwork for performance excellence because they help the athlete deal with the uncontrollables that appear at every meet. When athletes suffer from breakdowns in the execution of skills during competition, the cause is more likely mental than physical. A negative reaction or thought may trigger muscle tension that then disrupts smooth technical proficiency.

**STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATING MENTAL SKILLS**

**Practice for Physical Training**

*Visualize the internal processes working.* As you are training, visualize the physiological processes that are occurring. When you are in the weight room doing squats, picture all the muscle fibers involved firing and stretching with each lift. When you are running, visualize the oxygen from your lungs being absorbed into the capillaries, turning your blood bright red, and moving through the body to the oxygen-depleted leg muscles. Imagine feeling the infusion of fresh oxygen into your body with each breath. Be aware of when you are into the workout and when you are just going through the motions. Make it a choice to be into it. You can’t be into it all the time but take responsibility for your level of engagement.

*Replace negative self-talk with positive self-talk.* Physical discomfort often leads to negative self-talk. Develop a positive self-talk script to use during intense physical training. Use phrases like, “I feel strong and can go forever,” “With each step I’m moving closer to my goals,” or “My pain/fatigue is making me better.” Positive self-talk means focusing on what you can do, rather than what you can’t do.

*Practice performance skills as you train.* Use the time in the weight room to hone your performance skills. For example, while performing a workout, take one set of lifts and go through your pre-performance routine exactly as it would be during a competition. The goal is to find the optimal mental state and keep it through the set. Do this especially on the days when you are not feeling as strong. Practice having a good, difficult day.

*Find meaning in the effort.* Physical training is often hard and grueling. Many times it is easy to lose the spark needed to get the most out of each training repetition. As you go through your most challenging training sessions, imagine the goals you have set for the season and repeat that goal in your head with each effort. If your goal is to throw 53 feet in the shot, say “53” with each squat. When you can see that the effort is directly connected to your dreams, then you will get more out of these sessions.

**Focus on the pain and surrender your resistance to it.** The next time you are training at a physically intense level, remain aware of the physical sensations of the pain. Describe it to yourself without judgment. What temperature is it? Describe the location of it. Is it localized or general? What does the pain tell you? What shape is the pain? Suffering is a negative emotion that comes from one’s resistance to the sensations. Stay connected to these sensations in this way, and it may be less painful.

**Practice for Technical Skills**

*Go through the motions.* Close your eyes and perform a few movements relative to your event very slowly. Pay attention to every sensation you feel. Feel the various muscles contract and relax. Maintain awareness of where your arms and legs are at every moment. This is what it feels like to have the mind and body connected. Practice this to enhance your body awareness.

*Evaluate instead of judge.* Following each repetition, evaluate the attempt. Avoid using judging words such as good, bad, sloppy, etc. Take a specific element of the skill and rate how it was. For example, if you are working on getting full extension when you release the discus, then after each attempt rate the release from 1 (limited) to 5 (completely full). Evaluating in this way will provide you with information that can be used to make adjustments and foster improvement. Look for the information and strive to get more out of it.

*Pay attention to tempo and rhythm.* The technical elements of a skill are like musical notes. There is clear difference between playing the notes and making music. A high jumper may be able to execute each specific component of the skill but be unable to jump high. Commit to doing practice attempts with a total focus of executing the correct tempo and rhythm. Evaluate each attempt, not by technical criteria, but by tempo and feel. During big competitions, tempo and feel may be the first things that break down.
Have a specific purpose for each drill. There is a difference between a quality repetition and a mediocre one. A quality repetition possesses intensity, intention, and purpose. What is the intensity that matches the intended purpose of the drill? If you are running, what are you training your body to do? Does the intensity of your effort match what you want your body to learn to do? When you have a clear purpose it will be easier to find the matching intensity needed.

Practice for Competitive Simulation

Develop concentration routines. The purpose of a pre-race or pre-throw concentration routine is to create an internal environment that gives you the best chance to produce your best effort. Most often this requires that the mind become “quiet” and the body finds the optimal level of arousal. It is easier to achieve these states during practice because during practice the external environment is not as stressful. Therefore it is essential to increase the level of intensity at practice so that the concentration routine can be tested and be honed for high-level competition. Before developing your routine you must first ask yourself what it means to be ready. Then, develop a routine that allows you to funnel your focus and energy into getting ready.

Practice dealing with adversity. The ability to face adversity and deal with it effectively is the mark of all great athletes. Thorough performance preparation must include practice drills that include having to deal with adverse competitive situations. This can include extreme weather conditions, prolonged waiting periods, hostile fans, a slick track, or equipment not feeling right. It is important to dedicate practice repetitions to dealing with these situations and learning to bounce back from them. Practice the three R’s to deal with adversity; Recognize the adverse situation. Release your attention from it and the emotions attached to it. Refocus on the present task.

Practice compensating and adjusting. Athletes often practice with the expectation that on meet day everything will be perfect and all their skills will come together. This may only happen 10-15% of the time, if they are fortunate. Most of the time something will be off. It is important to practice making adjustments and compensating for all conditions. For example, occasionally practice throwing a discus that is slightly heavier or more slippery than the one you normally use. This will allow you to practice throwing when the discus doesn’t feel right. The key element when making adjustments during competition is to trust those adjustments. It would be extremely difficult to trust something in competition that has not been done in practice. It is helpful to bring into practice the situations that scare you the most so that you can practice dealing with them. One thing that we have learned from top-level coaches is that whatever you do in competition comes first from practicing it. So practice time-delays, poor conditions, and the like, and bring on the adversity. You don’t have to practice this way every day. Approximately once every two weeks should help you feel more thoroughly prepared.

Let the quality of your practice sessions serve as the foundation for your confidence. There are two types of confidence: Confidence based on previous results, and confidence based on preparation. Confidence based on previous results is fleeting. Results do not always accurately reflect how an athlete’s journey to excellence is progressing. Confidence based on preparation is controlable and can be stable. Toeing the line with the feeling that you can handle adversity in the competitive situation is a type of confidence that cannot be taken away.

Avoid overtraining. While intensity and effort at practice are important, you must be careful not to go over the top during training and leave yourself drained for the meet. Overtraining can be a trap that emerges from a “more is better” mentality. Quality practice does not always mean long and extended practice. It means building fitness without breaking down one’s health. Oftentimes the most effective practices are short and interspersed with short bouts of high intensity. Of course this is where the coach’s expertise is critical.

One cannot separate the mental from the physical, technical, and competitive aspects of performance. Excellence in athletic performance involves total involvement in the present moment. Many athletes make the mistake of thinking that the more repetitions they can fit into a workout, the better. This approach often results in many of those repetitions being executed mindlessly and sloppily. During competition, with all of the potential distractions and stressors, the athlete must be able to funnel his or her focus on the event time after time. Refocusing on the present is as valuable a skill for an athlete as the starting technique is for a sprinter. The practice environment is the training ground for the mindful attention of the present. The integration of mental focus with each component of practice is what contributes to a quality practice session.
MENTAL PREPARATION FOR QUALITY PRACTICE

Suppose for a moment that you had the opportunity to spend just a few minutes with the wisest and most knowledgeable person in the world. Someone who could teach you about anything you wished to know. How would you prepare yourself for such a meeting? What would you do thirty minutes prior to the meeting? How about five minutes prior? Practice time is sacred time. It is the opportunity to learn, refine, and prepare for one's greatest athletic experiences. Once the practice is over, the opportunity to improve for that day is gone forever. Here are a few suggestions for preparing yourself for a quality practice.

Get excited about practice. Throughout the day, take moments and visualize yourself having a great practice and improving on specific skills. See yourself working through the difficult and challenging aspects of practice one drill at a time with a positive attitude. For motivation, look for the connection between working through a tough practice and achieving your performance goals. See yourself pushing yourself in every drill.

Transition into practice mode. Decide what it means to be fully prepared for practice. Select a moment at which practice starts for you. Develop a routine that allows you to clear your mind of distractions and get focused on having a quality practice. For example, as you enter the gate to get onto the track, take a breath and as you exhale feel yourself transition from your non-athlete self into your athlete self. Develop symbolic acts, such as taking off your sweats or changing shoes, to trigger this transition. The main idea is to shed yourself of any previous psychological baggage that will weigh you down at practice. All athletes must find that symbolic trigger that allows them to be ready to practice.

Have a goal or purpose for the day. Even though your coach may have a structured plan for you, it is still important to have a couple of personally meaningful goals to accomplish. When you are training by yourself you must take responsibility for the quality of the practice. When you remain conscious of accomplishing a specific goal, it keeps you invested in the practice rather than losing interest. Writing down your goal on a small card or sheet of paper while you change shoes can be part of your transition routine. This type of self-coaching is critical in track and field since you are training on your own a lot of the time. This is not football or basketball where a coach is constantly giving you feedback. In track and field the athlete has to take more responsibility and ownership of their performance.

PURPOSE MAKES PRACTICE

Complete the following statement:
Practice makes _____________.

If you wrote "perfect", rethink your response. If a discus thrower completes 30 throws incorrectly in practice, does that practice lead to perfection? A more accurate statement about practice is that practice makes permanent. When behaviors and skills are repeatedly practiced they eventually become committed to long-term memory where they exist permanently or until that skill is replaced. These skills are the ones most likely to emerge under pressure. Regardless of the type of skill (physical, technical, competitive, mental) repeated practice can either enhance or inhibit performance excellence.

If the skills are practiced in a way that simulates the competitive environment then practice becomes a strong contributor to performance. When the skills are practiced in a way that does not simulate the competitive environment then practice can inhibit performance. If a shot putter is practicing throws while talking to others and spacing out, then what is really being practiced (and reinforced) is distracted throwing. The more one practices this way, the more likely this will happen during competition.

Practice can actually make your performance worse if there isn't something directing quality into the practice. The difference between a quality repetition and a mediocre one is how purposeful that attempt is. It's not unlike raising and lowering your arm. You can raise it with purpose and be almost completely aware of the movement up and down, or you can raise it up and down quickly, giving no attention to it. Every repetition and attempt in practice reinforces some specific skill. For quality practice to occur there must be a specific purpose to each repetition.

There are two main purposes to your practice. The first is practicing for skill development and the second is practicing for performance. When you practice for skill development, the skill is broken down and specific aspects of the skill are repeated continuously. If you are a hurdler, for example, you would do repeated attempts, concentrating specifically on your lead leg each time.
you go over a hurdle.

When practicing for performance, the athlete simulates as closely as possible the requirements and conditions of competition. An example of this would be to rehearse your entire race from going through your pre-race routine, getting into the blocks, and running the distance full speed. One repetition may take 15 minutes to complete. Practicing for performance includes simulating different situations you might face during competition. An example of this would be to pretend you false started and to practice getting resettled and into the blocks again. Then pretend there is a delay on the starter's gun, and practice staying patient. Like the astronaut training, you should include as many conceivable situations as you can into your practices. It is not necessary to practice this way every day, but enough to feel prepared to deal with different situations.

The difference between the two types of practices is that when practicing for skill development, the targeted skill is repeated over and over again to allow you to focus on a specific aspect of the skill without being distracted. Whereas, when practicing for performance the sole purpose is to practice dealing with the internal (thoughts, emotions, feelings, etc.) and external (race conditions) distractions of competition. In these conditions there are more stimuli to contend with, such as crowd noises, other competitors, different track conditions, and so on. This type of practice gives the athlete an opportunity to learn how to better deal with those conditions.

Both practicing for skill development and practicing for performance are important to the overall process of performance excellence. The challenge is to match the purpose of practice to your current goals. If it is early in the season and there are specific technical skills that you need to work on, then repeated practice attempts with little interference would provide you with an effective learning environment to work on those skills.

However if it is late in the season and a day or two prior to an important meet, then practicing in a competition-simulated environment would better prepare you to perform in meet conditions. At this time in the season you may not have the time to learn new skills or make technical changes in practice to the degree that they can be automatically executed in competition. In the competitive environment when the stress level is high, the body will do what it has trained itself to do. The purpose of practicing for performance is to prepare yourself to perform the skills you have at their fullest potential under competitive stress.

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**TEN WAYS TO ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF YOUR PRACTICE**

As you can see, quality practice includes a dynamic and specific array of strategies and concepts. The following ten suggestions summarize and provide more specific ways you can implement the concepts into your practice regimen.

1. **Evaluate and take responsibility for the quality of your practice.** Before practice, determine what criteria you will base an evaluation of your practice quality upon. Once you have completed practice, go back over those criteria and rate how you did. Even if you did not feel 100%, did you get 100% out of whatever you had? If you did not, what could you have done to get more quality out of it? The quality of your practice is your responsibility. Focus on what you can do, rather than what you can't do. (A Quality Practice Checklist is provided at the end of the chapter to help evaluate your practices).

2. **Have a mission for practice.** Ask yourself before practice, “What do you want to say about the practice when you are finished?” A sprinter will only have so many full-intensity efforts available for each day. If you are not fully engaged and focused on those repetitions, they become wasted attempts: one less opportunity to give yourself a competitive edge in races. Be systematic in developing a specific plan and purpose for each practice.

3. **Be enthusiastic.** Nothing is ever done with quality unless it is done with enthusiasm. Whether making music, giving a speech, building a table, or practicing for greatness, if there is no enthusiasm there will be no quality. If you are feeling that you “have to” go to practice, remind yourself why you are doing this. Revisit your dream goals and see the connection this practice has with what is important to you. Turn the “have to” into a “want to”.

4. **Have a pre-practice routine.** Select a specific time that practice will begin for you. It could be as you enter the locker room or as you walk onto the track. Pick a symbolic ritual such as putting your track shoes on or taking off your warm-ups as a trigger for you to “shed your day” and all that went with it. Let this be the time when you cast off your off-track concerns—relationships, illnesses in family, finances, etc. and focus instead on being an athlete.

5. **Refocus, refocus, refocus.** An athlete cannot be reasonably expected to remain completely focused on practice for an entire two-hour period. You will go through bouts of distraction, boredom, frustration,
and anxiety. The key skill is not to remain focused throughout the entire practice, but to consistently be aware when your focus is not where it needs to be and to have something to help bring your focus back. Ask yourself several times throughout practice, “Where is my focus?” When you find yourself being distracted, take a break, release the distraction, and bring your focus back to the process, the present, and the positives. If it helps, you could write down a reminder to focus, such as “now” on some article of clothing or on a piece of equipment. Practice turning it around so you can do the same during competition.

6. Simulate meet conditions. The most common frustration felt by athletes is that they can perform better in practice than in meets. The solution to this is to take occasional practice sessions and make the conditions as similar as possible to meet conditions. Although you can’t make it exactly the same, you can make it more like competition. One way to do this is to reduce the number of partial repetition attempts and replace them with full competition attempts. Instead of taking 30 throws with the javelin, take just 10. For each of those ten go through your entire pre-throw routine, measure and record each throw, and if there is normally a 10 minute break between throws in meets, take 10 minutes between attempts. Also, practice dealing with the most challenging meet conditions you can. Pick a windy or rainy day and go through a simulated meet.

7. Practice being confident. Think about the best performances you’ve had. Picture your body language, what you were saying, and how you walked. Practice maintaining these behaviors during practice. Even if you are not feeling confident on the inside, if you demonstrate confidence in your manner, then there is a greater chance those confident feelings will return. Act being confident until you make it happen. Pretend you are rehearsing for a part in a movie. Your role is to play a confident, fully prepared, and focused athlete competing in a big meet.

8. Embrace adversity. In sport there are very few things that can be counted on happening. The one thing that will happen to every athlete is adversity. The more you put yourself in the competitive arena, the more frequently adversity will raise its ugly head. You can choose to try to ignore it if you’d like, but this will usually make it that much more bothersome. If you acknowledge it instead, it might not go away but its effects on you could be reduced. Bring adversity into every practice. Pour water on the ring and practice throwing the shot in a wet ring. Tell yourself that you like it. In competition the athlete who can best deal with adversity is usually the athlete who performs to his/her potential. Welcome adversity in practice so you’ll know you can handle it better than anyone in competition.

9. Commit fully to each repetition. If you only do what your coach asks you to do in practice, nothing more, nothing less, is that a quality practice? To get the most out of practice you must understand the purpose and meaning of each attempt and commit totally to it. If your coach instructs you to do a specific drill but you don’t commit completely to it, that drill will not fulfill its purpose. If you are not completely convinced of a drill’s effectiveness, either ask more questions or decide that you will trust that it will help and commit to it completely. This is where you can practice your commitment to the attempt. During competition, execution can break down if there is a lack of commitment to the plan. For example, if a middle distance runner does not commit to the race strategy developed by the coach and the athlete, then there may be moments in the race where the runner goes too fast and blows up at the end of the race. Commit first by visualizing yourself doing it. Enter into a partnership with your coach so you can learn from each other.

10. Imagine yourself having a quality practice. During the day imagine and experience yourself at practice being motivated to get the most out of every drill. Experience yourself working hard on the track. Feel yourself doing the skills.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

No one ever wakes up one morning and discovers that he has an Olympic gold medal hanging around his neck. As an athlete, commitment to a process that includes consistent quality practices is the most important and valuable decision you can make. While many factors influencing the outcome of performance are beyond the direct control of the athlete, the quality of your practice and training is an aspect of performance excellence you can control. This does not mean you can choose to always be at your best during practice, but instead that you choose to get the most from yourself that is available. The purpose of practice is to get you ready to maximize your performance on any given day, in any given situation. You can’t perform your absolute best every time but you can practice getting the most from what you have to give, and you can practice dealing effectively with adverse situations. Like the ancient Samurai warriors, to be fully ready is to expect nothing and be prepared for
Quality Practice Checklist

Date: _________________________

Check (✓) the items that were present during your most recent practice.

☐ Highly motivated to practice and improve.
☐ Had specific skills I wanted to work on.
☐ Asked questions.
☐ Engaged in positive self-talk.
☐ Encouraged my teammates.
☐ Kept my energy high throughout practice.
☐ Gave great attention to detail.
☐ Practice repetitions executed at full (game-like) speed.
☐ Prepared myself for quality practice by engaging in a pre-practice routine.
☐ Chose to be confident at practice.
☐ Understood clearly how each drill would help me improve, or I asked.
☐ Understood clearly the intensity, focus, energy, and movement required for each drill.
☐ Was fully committed to doing the drills exactly as the coach instructed.
☐ Competed to be the best at each drill.
☐ Held my teammates accountable for their effort, intensity, and focus during practice.
☐ Took responsibility for the quality of today’s practice.
☐ Practiced mental toughness (dealing with adversity) at practice.
☐ Communicated effectively with my teammates and coaches.

Three things I could have done to improve the quality of today’s practice.

a.

b.

c.

everything. Simulation of the competitive environment is essential to the process of being optimally prepared. The more you can practice dealing with adversity, the more ready you will be to handle those situations. As you practice dealing with unpleasant weather, time delays, a slick track, sub-par equipment, low energy, etc., you will build the confidence that you will be able to deal with and perform well when those conditions occur. Possessing that kind of confidence will give you an edge over the athletes that have not prepared as thoroughly. When you step up to the line with these mental skills in your back pocket, you are ready.

Let’s say this chapter has managed to educate you, make you more aware of, and has motivated you to go out and have a high-quality practice session. As a result, you decide to go out this week and implement these strategies to have five days of very intense, effective, and high-quality practice sessions. This does not guarantee that you will set a PR in next week’s meet. Excellence does not work that way. A week of great practices is just a drop in the ocean. Excellence is a process of consistent engagement of quality practice.

Practicing in this way is not easy, especially when some of your teammates may not be practicing with the same degree of quality. There will be days when your tired body (and mind) tells you to take it easy. Performance excellence will come with quality practice, but not immediately. Expectation of quick results can be a distraction and de-motivator. Tell yourself to be patient and trust that practicing this way is the most you can do to prepare and allow your body to adapt on its own schedule. The alternative is to doubt the process. Surrender to the process and know that you have given yourself the best opportunity for success. Commit to consistent engagement in high-quality practice and training for eight weeks and let what happens happen.

REFERENCES