

Importance of mental toughness in sport



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Mental Toughness: What is the Real Difference Between Winning and Losing?

When it comes to being successful, you can never find a substitute for hard work. In the corporate world, you need to learn the ropes of the business and spend countless hours on reading books and attending seminars on self-improvement. In sports, you have to train consistently in order to reach your full potential.

But what if during an important business meeting, you suddenly had a mental block and anxiety followed? As a result, you forgot to mention an important point and because of it, the business deal fell apart. Same thing can happen in a Jiu-jitsu practice session where a sudden lapse in judgment could lead to a reversal, and in a matter of seconds, you were the one tapping out. How come we can be so prepared in doing something and then lose just like that?

UFC 117: Anderson Silva Vs. Chael Sonnen

Sonnen dominated the first four rounds of this championship match by using his wrestling skill. In round 5, Sonnen went for another takedown. Almost two minutes is left, and the audience is in awe. A new champion will be crowned, the long-time reigning champion will be defeated, the one considered as the GOAT (Greatest of All Time) will lose— the unthinkable will happen! Sonnen is on the guard again and continued with the ground and pound to add more damage to his opponent. Silva threw a few punches from the bottom and Sonnen lifted his left arm to block. In the process, Silva quickly positioned his leg behind Sonnen's neck and a leg triangle was in place. Silva secured the

hold and one of the greatest comeback fights in sports happened.... Sonnen tapped out! He was only 1 minute and 50 seconds from being a champion.

A lot of professional fights end up this way; one lapse in judgment can make or break a career. Some fighters learned from it but some of them never recovered. Concentration makes you apply everything that you have learned in training. Success starts in the mind but unfortunately, not everyone can sustain that concentration during a fight. When two combatants face off, you can take advantage of your skills and concentrate on executing it. However, if both fighters have a similar skill set and conditioning, the only deciding factor here is how mentally tough they are. Who will break first? Who will make the first mistake? That's when you need to be mentally tough more than physically tough.

Relaxation and Concentration

Mental toughness encompasses not just fighting sport but all competitive sports and other areas in our everyday life, including our job. Several competitors can be so good in practice but underachieves in the actual competition when the pressure of the game starts to mount up. LeBron James was called “ Lechoke” before, and it only stopped when he won an NBA championship not just once but twice. Now, people in the media and fans think that he can surpass Michael Jordan and be the GOAT in basketball.

Concentration is the ability to have that laser-like focus on what's important and to let go of all distractions. However, in order to concentrate, you should be relaxed. Relaxation is defined as the state of being calm despite pressure. Take note that relaxation and concentration are interacting mental skills—

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they work hand in hand. You cannot be mentally tough if you don't have both.

Float like a butterfly (be relaxed) and sting like a bee (concentrate and hit the target). That's how Muhammad Ali became the GOAT in boxing! Keep in mind that being relaxed means that you are excited in a good way. If you are totally relaxed, you will fall flat during the competition. You need to be pumped up and ready for action. Like physical conditioning and learning skills, being relaxed also takes practice—the more time you invest in it, the more it will develop.

During boxing, if you are relaxed, you can see the incoming punches and you will be able to dodge them easier. If you are nervous and under pressure, you are more likely to close your eyes as the opponent's gloves hit towards your face. If you are too anxious, your body will tighten up and you won't be able to execute all of the skills that you have learned during practice. That is the reason why fighters have their entrance music as they walk their way towards the ring or the octagon—it makes them feel relaxed.

Another way to relax is to embrace and accept nervousness. It's very normal and once you accept the reality, then you will be calmer. Pre-competition rituals such as mumbling repeated words and doing rhythmic movements that could take the fighter's focus away from distractions are also of great help.

When it comes to defense, breathing plays a very important role. You can be the best striker but without oxygen, you will be like a race car without a fuel. Thus, deep, slow breathing is needed before and during the competition.

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Throwing combination punches and kicks or going for a reversal during a jiu-jitsu match requires a lot of air in your oxygen tank. If you don't breathe properly, you won't be able to recover and soon, your legs will feel heavy, your arms will start falling, and it's your turn to get punched in the face.

Laser-Like Concentration

A laser pen doesn't dance all over the place when you focus it on an object; it will stay there as long as you allow it to. Concentration is all about focusing on the present situation. Recalling failures in the past or worrying about the future will not help. Do what you need to do at that very moment. Before you drink water, you don't try to determine where it came from or think whether you will sweat it out or urinate afterwards. Be honest. You just drink it, right? Likewise, when you are competing, you can only control the present. So, focus on what needs to be done right now and focus on it like a laser!

Don't Drift Away

Losing your focus can happen during a match but it's up to you if you want to drift away or return to focus. A bad call from the referee, trash talk, boos from the crowd, intimidation by your opponent and a lot of other stuff like these can break your concentration. However, remember to compete the way you have been trained. A secured submission can slip by if one of the basic jiu-jitsu techniques is not well-executed. A sure win can turn to a loss, so the focus should be within YOU – you may drift away but return as quickly as you can.

Conclusion

All your hard work will become futile if you are not mentally tough.

Remember that a sharp mind can cut deeper! So, the pain, the struggle, the exhaustion, the thought of giving up— all of these will take your game or career to the next level!