

FIGHTING TALK

A MONTHLY
COLUMN INTENT ON
IMPROVING YOUR
COMBAT SKILLS.



THIS MONTH WE LOOK AT MENTAL IMAGERY HOW TO STEP INTO THE ZONE!

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY TAUSEEF ASRI

Have you ever experienced a state of grace when everything you do seems natural, easy and flawless? In sport we call this 'the zone'. If you are an athlete you are probably familiar with the term and the importance of the mind in affecting performance. The right mental approach can add a new dimension to your training and provide massive benefits to your

personal and professional life.

The zone is so desirable because it is a state in which your performance is no longer inhibited by stress, which can burn you from within. We experience stress in everyday life, as well as in a fight. Dealing with it requires mental strength, which is the objective of sports psychology.

I am no doctor but speaking as a former fighter, and now as a coach, I have

learned a few things about mental preparation first hand as well as from research and I would like to share them with you.

Being a fighter is tough: it requires regular training, commitment, a clean diet and much more. But fighting is not just about trading blows and takedowns, they are just the tip of the iceberg.

A smart coach realises the need to teach more than fighting skills and knowledge about

physical and technical conditioning. He also has to be able to understand what goes on in the mind, and how to apply this knowledge to keep his students motivated and ready throughout the season.

Think how many times you have seen gifted footballers play badly for no apparent reason, or a good team lose to a weaker one. Or how many times you have seen a fighter come back after being knocked down to win a fight.

Think also about how you feel just before you are about to take part in a fight or any big sports event. Your heart races, your mouth gets dry and all of a sudden you feel tired and don't want to be there. Stress is devouring you. Many defeats or bad performances could have been avoided if coaches had prepared their athletes for these situations.

In modern sport, performance is no longer regarded solely in terms of technical and physical conditioning. Attitude is regarded as **the** key ingredient when it comes to winning: play with the wrong mindset and you are very likely to fail.

I remember a TV ad when I was younger. The main line was 'power is nothing without control'. So true! For any kind of performance, not only in sport, the brain is the major player. You need to accept this and to understand the stresses that can damage you. Denying it is the first step towards failure.





The value of mental preparation in sport is widely recognised now. It is common for professional teams to employ a psychologist. But the average combat gym cannot afford one so the coach becomes the closest thing to a psychologist that a fighter can turn to. The value of this role cannot be under-estimated.

I remember 15 years ago when the master of my martial arts team which is called S.A.M. Fragale, introduced us to this weird training method. He suggested we read books to improve our focus before competitions to tame negative stresses.

Some other teams I spoke to said this idea was a waste of time. But for me it was a great success. The most inspiring book I read was *Psycho-Cybernetics*, which was written in the 1950s by an American doctor called Maxwell Maltz. His book was the forerunner to many motivational books and helped me to appreciate the power of my mind.

Once you start to tap into the value of the mind it is like wearing glasses for the first time—you see and experience things in a different light. But you have to be careful not to put on the wrong glasses or you might struggle even to walk.

Maltz's book helped me to experience the zone during my fighting career,

although of course I wish I could have experienced it more often. It was such an extraordinary feeling that, years later, I still remember the lightness and adrenaline of such moments. My body moved almost without me realising. It was as if someone else was in control, which in a way is what kind of happens because your sub-conscious brain takes over. It knows what to do and this allows you to express your full potential. You won't necessarily win but you will be happy with your performance.

Sport scientists and psychologists have analysed the zone and how to replicate it. I cannot guarantee that this article will always help you to achieve it but I will suggest some specific things that you can do to give you a good chance.

As a coach, it is my job to try to build a successful mindset. I listen to my fighters and try to identify weaknesses. Training really tells you a lot about people besides skill and fitness levels. You can separate the quitters from the winners in the gym, as well as in life, by their attitudes.

Sport at all levels can help anyone become more confident and successful. I really do recommend thinking about your visits to the gym from a broader perspective from now on.

COMBAT SPORTS AND PSYCHOLOGY

The psychology behind combat sports is more complicated than in other sports because of the primordial nature of the event, i.e. a contest is all about survival and the 'fight or flight' reaction kicks in. You need to prepare for this long before you step into the ring. It is not something you can sort out ten minutes before the fight in the changing room.

The psychological conditioning that you have done will prove to be just as important as the physical conditioning and should have its own phases within a yearly training plan.

The intensity of psychological and physical conditioning is inversely proportional: early on in your training cycle the physical training takes precedent then the closer you get to a fight the more the psychological aspect takes over. By this stage you should increase the time spent building a strong self-image in order to produce what is described in *The Sport Psychologist's Handbook*, published by Wiley, as "skills that allow for coping with recovery of composure, recapturing perception and maximising assertive behaviours in contest".

GENERALLY SPEAKING, THIS PROCESS HAS SEVERAL PHASES:

- *Establishing attitudinal and motivational behaviours to increase the positive value of the sporting experience*
- *Setting personal and/or group training goals*
- *Learning mental imagery to enhance performance*
- *Competition psychology to develop a basic strategy*
- *Establishing long-term goals to guide performance and participation*
- *Group orientation: to establish team spirit(1)*

To keep things simple, and to focus on what matters most, I will discuss what I believe to be the cornerstone of achieving these things: mental imagery.

WHAT IS IMAGERY?

Imagery involves the athletes imagining themselves in a specific environment or performing a particular activity. The images should be positive ones of the fighter achieving the task and performing well. They should imagine enjoying the challenge and feeling satisfied using all their sensory skills—sight, sound, feel, touch and smell.

You have to relax if you want to be receptive to mental imagery. If you do this then imagery can help you learn how to see yourself achieving goals at the level of performance desired. It will help you not only 'see' yourself being successful but also increase your self-confidence.

My coach used to tell me that the mirrors in gyms were useful for shadow boxing because they help to reinforce the idea in your brain that you are kicking and punching correctly. The brain detects and records you practising and creates a successful image of you doing it. Consequently your actions become smoother and more fluid because your brain feels confident.

Many people tell me when they start martial arts they feel stupid, particularly in front of the mirrors. What this really means is they do not believe enough in what they are doing. They don't think they can do it and therefore they do not believe what they see in their reflections. Over time this changes.

HOW DO WE APPLY MENTAL IMAGERY?

If you think about stressful situations you become more familiar with them so when they actually arise they are less daunting. This is because the brain struggles to understand the difference between real experiences and imagined ones, as long as the imagined one is as real as possible.

Stepping in the ring, in front of hundreds of people for the first time, can be daunting. The prospect of performing in front of a large, unfriendly crowd even fazes some veterans.

Mental imagery can help. Relax as much as possible and think about being in that situation, moment by moment. Go through everything that happens. Doing this over and over again will lower stress levels because your brain will already have experienced the situation by the time it actually happens. It won't perceive it as something new and this will reduce anxiety.

I used mental imagery when I had some performance issues in my first fights. I can remember as if it were yesterday how I would lay in bed and imagine being in the changing room, getting oiled up, smelling the Thai oil, putting my shorts on, putting my gloves on, doing my warm up, moving in the corridors and reaching the ring path; the people cheering, seeing myself walking and stepping into the ring under the spotlights.

At the beginning I could hear my heartbeat thumping faster and faster the closer I got in my imagination to the ring. The stress was real; the adrenaline was real. But after rehearsing it many times I felt much calmer and all I started to perceive was determination and confidence. It worked very well. Later I applied the same principle to other situations, such as work interviews. Try it—it could make a huge difference to your performance.

Professional athletes have their own ways of reaching the right state of

mind. Some use techniques like mine but however you do it you must practice everyday, exactly as you do for your body. It's about getting to know yourself better than you ever did, accepting your fears as part of your personality and then rather than denying them, sorting them out.

You can also use imagery to practice executing a movement or combination. See yourself doing it perfectly over and over again. If you strongly believe it your brain will not know if you are in the gym or on the couch. Then before a competition go through what you have rehearsed in your head.

LAST BUT NOT LEAST

Whether you are a coach or athlete, think only positively about previous experiences. Recreate in your athletes' brains or in your own that sense of pride and energy that victory gives.

Thinking of what your opponent can do is useless and detrimental. You cannot control that side of the game. Instead ensure that your mind focuses on how well prepared you are, which will boost your confidence and prevent you from falling victim to stress. Relaxing while thinking of this will take you a step closer to the zone.

If things go wrong, forget about it. You will probably have worked on a Plan B in advance, or just try to recapture your focus. Something that already happened cannot be changed. This sounds obvious but how often do you see sportsmen cursing the referee, or throwing tantrums? This attitude only makes them persist in thinking about negative things and the mistakes they are making. Sports psychology says you should put mistakes behind you and look forward.

Mind control is the pillar of success. Performing well in sport, as in life, requires many ingredients but the most important is your head. Train your mind and your body will follow. **M&F**

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REFERENCE:

(1) Page 378/379 (The Sport Psychologist's handbook—Wiley edition 2006).

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