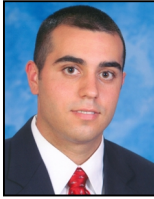


Mental Toughness: An Article



Coach Mulry

How To Take Complete and Total Control Of Your Associations And Emotional State

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to know that your competitors were dreading the moment they had to walk on the court, look across the net, and see you standing there ready to dominate & destroy them?

I continually hear the comment "I have no clue how you guys beat us!" from other coaches. Sometimes even the referees express their shock to me.

My competitors repeatedly approach me wondering what happened to their team when everything seemed to be in their favor. I usually smile and humbly say, "We played well today. It was a good match."

If they were smart, instead of telling me they don't have a clue, these people would be asking me: "How did you do it?"

The funny thing about coaches and volleyball players who are trying to improve (after they lose), is that they think they need to work harder. After they're beaten, they'll get mad and say, "We need to work harder, try harder, pass more balls, Ya Da Ya Da Ya Da. . ." I hear it all the time.

I know what it's like to struggle. I know what it is like to hope that someone will come along and teach you a "secret strategy" to make you and your team better, but inevitably your are not improving at the rate you should be!

And Here Is The Truth...Working Harder, Trying Your Best, Having Will Power, Spending More Time In The Gym, And Passing More Is Not The Secret!

And I'll tell you why in a minute, but first one of the biggest myths is the idea that the team with the most experience, the most talent, and the most expensive warm-up apparel will win (or at least be the most intimidating) still lingers - and it really makes me mad! It is absolutely ridiculous! Let me show you why.

As a Junior, I played volleyball for Holyoke High School. We squeaked into the Western Mass. Playoffs that year with barely a .500 record.

We had to play the team that had finished second in Western Mass.! Needless to say, we were downright

scared and straight-up intimidated.

During warm ups, as they crushed ball after ball, we watched with dropped jaws, shaky knees, thinking, "we wish we were as good as those guys!" or more honestly, "Oh, Shit!"

But, scared or not, we still had to play the game. Personally, I was wishing our bus would get a flat tire, the driver would get lost, or something would prevent us from making the match. I'm sure you know the feeling!

But all that wishing, wasn't gonna make a difference, because we had to suck it up and play anyway.

The other team was more experienced and did all the natural things bigger and better. Their whole goal seemed to intimidate us! And they did a pretty good job of it.

My team, not so proudly, wore glittering purple t-shirts, stamped with only a number. They wore \$100 warm-ups and top-of-the-line uniforms. They even wore the same shoes! We joked (out of nervousness) that they probably just spent the last half hour in front of the mirror, styling their hair together in the locker room.

When we shook hands, they barely acknowledged us, and then, as expected, they started to whoop us like we were a bunch of little boys. We must have made at least five errors in the first six plays.

"How embarrassing!" I thought to myself, as I looked over to the bench for some help. But none was given.

My teammates all started pointing fingers at one another about whose fault it was. The disgrace and humiliation seemed to come to a temporary end when they scored the 15th point, and we switched sides.

Then A Funny Thing Happened...

As Game 2 started, our hits started to fall for kills. Our setter started making better decisions, and putting up more accurate sets. As the defensive specialist I started running down balls, and reading the other teams hitters better. After 30 minutes of playing, my young team from Holyoke, with only one returning varsity player stunned and shocked the whole gym as we won the second game!

"...My young team from Holyoke, with only one returning varsity player stunned and shocked the whole gym as we won the second game!"

Since this was a tournament match, we still had to win two more games against them (which we did!). But that's not what's important. What's important was that we had tapped into something that we didn't know about - and none of us had a clue as to how we did it!

After the match, on the bus, I couldn't stop thinking about how different games 1 & 2 were. The thought, "How did we do it?" repeated itself over and over in my head.

The next two nights I could barely sleep as I continued trying to figure out where the "magic" came from. It wasn't until 3 days later, that it finally hit me!

"I know what it is!"

Key 1: Take Control of Your Emotions

"Why, Why, Why?" my mind kept repeating for days after my team went from being totally out of control on the court (and not having a clue what to do next), to suddenly playing better than ever and upsetting the number 2 seed.

Well, I finally got my answer. You know what it was? We took conscious and total control of our

emotions...instead of being the "victims" of them!

So, I began thinking, "If controlling our emotions helped us turn everything around and win that game, against such tremendous odds, what would be possible if we controlled our emotions in every game we played?"

I began testing that theory, and you know what I discovered? In nearly every situation, when you're able to stay in the drivers seat with your emotions, you play better. Every time. No exceptions.

How to get in the drivers seat and stay there...

The secret to getting into the driver's seat and staying there is what's called your "associations." To understand the power of associations, think about this. Isn't there a certain song that when you hear it, it reminds you of a special person or certain place?

Or, isn't there a certain person that when you think of him or her, you either get really good feelings or really negative feelings inside?

Even though you may not consciously tell your brain, "Oh this song reminds of this person", or "I really like/dislike this person," that's how your brain manages your experiences.

These kinds of associations are actually triggers. Anytime you feel very strong emotions and "attach" them to something else, like a person, place, thing, or action (like snapping your fingers, thrusting your fist upward, etc.), you create an association.

This whole idea comes from a psychiatrist named Pavlov. He put a dog on a chain and put a bowl of food outside the dog's reach. Once the dog began to salivate, Pavlov would ring a bell and pull the food away. The dog would stop salivating.

Pavlov repeated this process so many times that all he ultimately had to do was ring the bell and the dog would salivate automatically. Every time. Like clockwork!

The dog created an association to hearing the bell and linked it to salivating - unconsciously!

This is exactly the same way you create associations about every game and team you play, about your teammates, and about every skill you practice on a daily basis.

Associations build up in you at an unconscious level. They direct your focus and your emotions. They either support you or they don't!

Take Control Of Your Associations and You Send Your Winning Percentage Soaring

You've probably heard the Pavlov's dog story, but you probably never made the connection of how it could be used to improve your volleyball game and winning percentage.

Know this: If you create certain "empowering" associations or triggers, before and during competition, it allows you to access the ideal emotional states that help you perform at your absolute best - in every single match!

What this means to you is that you can take any great performance you had, identify what you did mentally and emotionally, create a "trigger" that allows you to recreate that state at will, then pull the trigger when you need to before and during competition.

When you play Volleyball, aren't there certain teams you face, that when you think of them, you instantly say something like this to yourself:

"We're going to destroy them!"

"We'll beat them - no problem!"

"I love playing those guys!"

On the other hand, aren't there also teams, that when you think of them, you say something like this to yourself:

"Oh no, I hate playing them!"

"They are sooo good!"

"They're bigger and faster than us!"

In both cases, you've unknowingly created associations to the thought of playing each of those teams. When your associations are like the first scenario, you will be incredibly resourceful, powerful, confident, and excited about playing.

In the second scenario, however, you'll be more likely to hesitate, be stressed, scared, and much less likely to perform at your best.

What's good about this is that you can mold, shape and change your associations so that you're always powerful, aggressive, and playing at your best!

Train Your Brain To Move Beyond Negative Thoughts And Emotions

Think about all the different emotions that you experience before, during, and after competition. Notice which of these emotions are negative...like anger, stress, and anxiety.

What if you were able to bypass such "power sucking" emotions and instantly transform yourself into a more motivated, courageous, confident, and go for it emotional state?

You could walk onto the volleyball court so focused about what you needed to do to win, that you'd never worry or doubt yourself.

When you have challenges, you'd instantly move into an emotion of total power and confidence, instead of hesitating, feeling worn out, and waiting until the game gets going before you (or your team) start performing at your best.

The ability to manage and transform your emotional state in an instant (and turbo-charge your playing level in the process) is a skill that you can learn. Anyone can learn it. And it's not as hard to do as you might think.

Take Complete and Total Control Of Your Associations And Emotional State

The first step is learning how to master your body movements ("physiology"), self-talk, and the pictures you see in your head ("visual images").

For example, I was working with a College Volleyball player we'll call "Sara". Sara was an all-American, played for a Division I school, and some other semi-professional teams.

One of the problems she had was maintaining her focus after making passing errors. So I asked her: "Do you notice the difference between how you move your body when you shank a pass and recover with a perfect pass next serve, and when you make multiple errors in a row?"

She thought for a minute and said, "Yes. When I make multiple mistakes, I shrug my shoulders. Say 'I hope she doesn't serve me the next ball.' And I see myself shanking the next pass and getting benched." Next, I asked her "What's the difference when you bounce back?"

She thought for a minute and said, "When I make a mistake and bounce back, I'll say, 'Serve me the next ball.' Then my shoulders go back and I take a deep breath."

I said, "What images are going through your mind?"

She said, "I see myself passing the ball perfectly!"

She was already doing this naturally some of the time, but when I showed her how to do it every time, whenever she wanted to, on command, she could pass anything and focus on swinging much more aggressively.

Press Your Own Buttons For Outstanding Performance At Any Time

Some coaches and players get really mad when they don't play well against poor competition, but get really excited when they play awesomely against great competition.

Neither of these approaches is wrong, but real power comes from being able to stay "neutral" and simply noticing the difference of how you prepared in both situations - physically and mentally.

I learned this years ago while watching the other team as we celebrated our playoff upset victory. Their coach was incredibly frustrated with the boys, and I remember him saying that the core problem was how they warmed up for the game.

Physical preparation had nothing to do with it!

3 Important Factors You Must Know...

There are 3 important facts that most players and coaches miss. First, mental preparation preceded the physical preparation and was much more important.

Even the world's greatest volleyball player or team, with the world's greatest technique and strategies, will choke, freeze, and walk off the court with their heads down in failure and embarrassment, if they don't learn how to master their mind and emotions!

Last season, I was working with my team on serving. There I was watching them serve when one of my outside hitters ran behind the serving line and started saying, "Don't miss the serve! Don't miss the serve!"

As she was doing this, her shoulders were down, her tone was one of doubt, and there were 10 other things that were out of whack, just because of her statement, "Don't miss the serve!"

Internally, I was thinking "Oh my God, I've been coaching her for a year and a half and she's still doing this!" Instead of getting mad, I got resourceful....

An important point to remember is that your brain tends to give you what you focus on. Plus, your brain doesn't understand the word "Don't".

For example, if I say to you, "Don't think of a pink elephant." What comes to mind? Of course, A Pink Elephant!

Now, the Pink Elephant example is pretty common, but let me share with you what most people don't notice about it: Your words, the pictures you see in your head, and the way you move your body are all connected, so if you change how you are doing one, the others change too!

Implementing "State Management" Strategies For Quick & Powerful Results!

I told my player to take a deep breath, put her shoulders back and look where she wanted to serve. That interrupted her negative thought process, because it changed how she was moving her body, or what is called her "physiology."

Next, I asked her, "What would be a better phrase you could use?"

She came up with, "Aggressive, Zone 6!"

At that moment, since she changed her physiology and self-talk, and the visual images she was seeing in her head were focused on an aggressive serve to Zone 6.

All she needed to do next was to let her unconscious mind take over and let things flow...

Next time you are having trouble with confidence, aggressiveness, or using a specific skill, all you have to do is change 3 simple things

- Self-Talk
- Visual Images
- Physiology

... and that puts you into a resourceful emotional state that immediately enhances performance!

Learn How To Create Magic In Your Volleyball Performance - While you Sleep!

One thing that may surprise you is that you can actually use your sleep time to make dramatic improvements in your game and winning percentage.

You can learn any skill 10 times faster than you ever thought possible if you tap into the power of your sleep time.

You can eliminate limiting beliefs, access powerful resources, and set yourself in the direction of success all while you sleep!

Know this: your unconscious mind never sleeps. It's always awake, always listening, and always willing to help you enhance your performance if you allow it to.

What you think about before you go to bed at night runs through your mind 14 times as you sleep and dream.

That makes the few minutes before going to sleep the absolute best time to "program" your unconscious mind to help you improve your game - in whatever areas you want to improve.

Your Own Personal Wizard...

Sound hard to believe? A bit "loopy"? Stay with me . . .

Imagine with me for a moment that your unconscious mind is like a wizard with a bunch of little helpers that are just waiting for something to do for you.

The coolest thing about your unconscious wizard and helpers is that they have no limitations except the ones set for them by you.

By not actually asking your unconscious mind for help, you're actually limiting the results you can produce in your game - without meaning to.

You need to start asking for help, and as your mind starts drifting off into a light sleep (but you're still awake and aware) that's the best time to ask!

There are a ton of different ways to give yourself "sleep suggestions" (i.e. requests for help) that you can assist you in overcoming many challenges you may be facing now.

You can read them right before going to sleep, memorize them and repeat them before going to sleep, or tape record them and play them as you drift to sleep.

Think about the possibilities here! Anything that's limiting you right now, or anything you'd like to make even better can improve easily - while you sleep!

It might be getting your feet to the ball as you pass, or squaring your feet when you are setting. If you just sprained your ankle, you might want to ask for help healing yourself faster.

Ask for help to learn new skills faster, to beat a certain opponent, to peacefully move through game day jitters. On and on. Remember, no limits!

The most important thing about working with your unconscious mind as you drift off to sleep is that you be creative and have fun!

You can work on anything you want, need or that interests you.

The Power At Work Here Is Amazing!

To show you the power of this, I'll tell you about a one of my players who was struggling with his hitting. His dad approached me at a match and asked for some help because he thought his problem was psychological.

He said, "Last match, he played outstanding, but today, he seems to be struggling again."

That told me that the "emotional state" he was in when playing isn't one that's allowing him to access his full potential.

In other words, he had created some negative associations that were holding him back. I knew that if I could change his associations, I could improve his performance immediately.

Now, there are many ways to change associations, but what I did was guide him through a mini-visualization that re-associated him to a time when he was confident, and playing at a high level.

My strategy was to put him in a very confident emotional state, then have him run through the next few matches playing with that same emotional state.

Our next match was two days later, and there was a tremendous difference in his aggressiveness, confidence, and domination of the court.

The coolest thing about this example, is that when you learn to program your mind in this way, you can get the same results.

This Is Where Peak Performance Really Comes From

When you begin to trust your unconscious mind and let things flow, that's when you have "peak performance" consistently.

When I'm in a tough situation when playing, or I'm tired, I put myself in an altered state and give myself the command to just "Let things flow."

Simple as it sounds, it works every time! And very quickly.

See, your body already knows what to do to get the job done. The only thing that's going to get in your way is your conscious mind trying to think too much.

When you learn to give your mind and body over to your unconscious, you'll be able to react rather than think.

For example, Fall 2004 my number 1 hitter went down with an ankle sprain. The back up hitter went in there and played better than she has ever played before.

One of the reasons is that she's not "thinking" and "analyzing" every hit she makes, because she doesn't have the threat of being pulled.

She's just playing and enjoying herself. What's amazing is that her hits down the line have improved tremendously, and the trust from the whole team of her ability had improved.

This is also true for you! If you have ever done a skill well and allowed things to flow, then your brain and body knows how to do it, you just need give it the right suggestions and commands!

Pulling It All Together

- Ultimately, real volleyball power and extraordinary performance comes from:
 - Mastering your emotions on and off the court
 - Having absolute control over your physiology, self talk, and the visual images you run in your head
 - Creating powerful positive associations to all aspects of playing volleyball
 - Eliminating all negative associations to playing volleyball
 - Utilizing your natural ability to learn, grow, and excel, while sleeping!
 - Motivating yourself and others in powerful and consistent ways