

An Athlete's Guide to Mental Health and Performance



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Introduction



Throughout my college baseball career, I dealt with mental struggles, the yips, repetitive performance problems, injuries, and now the transition out of my career. I've experienced first-hand how the mental side of sports can directly impact performance, both positively and negatively. I worked with sports psychologists and mental performance coaches, and utilized resources from research and self-help literature to enhance my mental health and performance, all of which I have consolidated here. My hope is that you can find something you think is valuable, and implement it into your routine. It's important to consider none of these are quick fixes - they take habitual practice, just like improving in your sport. I encourage you to approach this with an open mind and see how these practices can unlock your potential as an athlete and improve your day-to-day well-being.



Non- negotiables



Non-negotiables are the basic fundamentals that ensure you are healthy and optimally prepared to compete. Without taking care of all these aspects, you are negatively impacting your sport development, health, focus, motivation, and overall well-being. These habits are the basic building blocks for success.



Non-negotiables

- Sleep:
 - 8-10 hours a night
 - Consistent bedtime and wake up
 - Limit screen time exposure especially before bed (blue light glasses, grayscale settings on your phone: Settings → Accessibility → Display and Text Size → Color Filters → Grayscale)
- Nutrition and Limiting Substance Use:
 - Well rounded meals - high protein, complex carbs, serving of fruit or vegetables every meal, limit processed foods, healthy snacking
 - Prioritize water over soda or sports drinks throughout the day (use Pedialyte or electrolyte mix if necessary)
 - Limit alcohol and other substance use - they all negatively impact performance and health outcomes in some capacity

Training Outside of Team Practices and Lifts

Academics and Career

Support System

Nutrition and Limiting Substance Use

Sleep

Non-negotiables

- Support System:
 - Identifying friends, family, loved ones, coaches, etc. who you can lean on
 - Establish a healthy social life outside of sports
- Academics and Career:
 - Maintain eligibility - you can't play if your grades aren't good enough
 - Take steps to progress in your career after sports
 - Pursue excellence in all that you do
- Training Outside of Team Practices and Lifts:
 - Team training is not enough by itself to develop you at a faster rate than your peers - if you want to be better than your competition, you have to train better

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Practices and Techniques



This section includes various sports psychology principles, mindfulness skills, and daily practices that improve performance. Consider trying them out in practice or throughout the day first to see how they work for you.



Noticing, Naming, and Anchoring

- Notice what is happening in your body, mind, etc.
 - “I’m noticing my mind is racing”
- Name your experience non-judgmentally
 - “I’m feeling anxious about missing this game-tying free throw”
- Use your anchor to reset - whatever method helps you feel calm
 - Close your eyes, take a deep breath, lock your sights on the back of the rim, go through your regular free throw routine
- Remember: you are not your thoughts, they are just noise
- Don’t try to push thoughts, feelings, or emotions away - accept them and allow them to be there
 - The more you try to push them away, the more attention your brain gives to them, ultimately making them stronger

Positive Self-Talk

- Speak positively toward yourself, repeat motivating phrases, or use humor
 - “I am skilled, I am prepared, I am confident”
 - “There’s no one better”
 - “Thank you brain for trying to protect me, but I got this”
 - “Fast, fast, fast”
- Remove negative phrases from your daily language like “I can’t do this”, “I suck”, etc.
- Identify phrases or words that resonate with you to use before a pivotal moment or amid struggle



Consistent Pre-game Routine

- Helps create a process-focused approach, comfort, and self-regulation
- Consistently follow the same *specific* routine - whatever it is that works for you
 - Example: watch highlight reel on the way to the game, listen to the same playlist, start warm up an hour and a half from game time, do individual stretches, follow team warm up, do visualization and breathwork 10 minutes before game start
- Prepare and practice varying warm ups for different situations in case of weather delays, player injuries, etc.
 - Routine is helpful, but you can't be so rigid that you are unable to perform without doing a specific stretch, getting a certain amount of shots up, throwing a certain amount of passes, etc.
 - Example: standard warmup, shortened warmup, emergency warmup



Box Breathing

- Use in high intensity emotional situations to regulate your nervous system or to calm yourself pregame
- Sit or stand upright
- Inhale for a count of 4
- Hold your breath for a count of 4
- Exhale for a count of 4
- Hold your lungs empty for a count of 4
- Repeat multiple times until comfortable or for specified time (2 minutes)



Journaling

- Use writing to explore thoughts, feelings, fears, desires or simply to vent
- Helps increase focus and provides an outlet for difficult thoughts and experiences
- Helpful to do right when you wake up or shortly before bed to clear your head
- Can also be used for gameplanning or post-game/practice reflections
- Examples:
 - Free association writing - remove the censor of your brain and write anything and everything that comes to mind
 - Gratitude journal - list of things you are thankful for
 - Rose/thorn/bud of the day (highlight, challenge, new idea or opportunity)
 - Daily task list



Visualization

- Actively creates brain connections and enhances confidence
- Passive Visualization:
 - Find or create a calm space, imagine the setting of performance (including the location, sounds, sensations, weather, etc.), picture yourself completing the task and what it feels like to do so (scoring the goal and celebrating with your teammates), and mentally rehearse it
- Active Visualization:
 - Go to the field/court and stand where you play, picture yourself successfully completing the task as you physically move through the actions of throwing, shooting, passing, etc.
 - The more specific the better - do it in your uniform, with your equipment, while your walkup song is playing, etc.

Personal Highlight Tape

- Create a highlight tape of you with in-game or in-practice film
- Watch the tape the night before a game, pre-game, or whenever you need a boost of confidence
- This shows your brain evidence that you are fully capable of playing at a high level and have been successful in the past
- This is especially helpful if you struggle with one specific task like free throws, kicking a field goal, throwing over to first base, etc.



Values-Based Goal Setting

- Identify your personal values
 - Examples: be a good teammate, be intentional, be disciplined
- Focus on acting in line with your values, rather than outcome based goals
- If you rely only on objective goals, outcomes are the only things that dictate success
- You can still be successful by acting in line with your values
 - Examples:
 - You can be a good teammate by bringing a positive attitude and picking others up despite not scoring in the game
 - You can be disciplined by avoiding fouling and contesting a shot well despite allowing someone to score on you

Meditation

- This practice aims to pause and observe your thoughts, feelings, and emotions from a distance, bringing you into the present moment and becoming more calm and focused
- It allows you to explore the internal dialogue, mental movies, and worries that often bring you out of the present moment
- Meditation reminds you of the control you have over your mind and what you allow to directly influence your attention and emotions
- Regardless of the method used, it is practiced by tuning out external noise and paying attention to brain activity as you focus on your breath or body sensations
 - Active: meditating while doing a simple task (walking, folding laundry, driving)
 - Passive: typically done while laying or sitting down
- Think about watching your thoughts, emotions, and worries flow down a stream



Creativity Outside of Sport

- Find creative outlets outside of your sport that bring you joy and give you space to step away
- Typically these are things you enjoyed when you were younger
 - Examples: arts and crafts, baking, writing, digital media creation, gardening, Legos, etc.
- Creative does not have to strictly follow the literal meaning - anything that creates new neural connections, changes your perspective, or simply makes you happy
 - Examples: going for a walk, pickleball, singing your favorite songs, community service, etc.
- These are important things to practice to remind yourself that you have multiple identities outside of being an athlete (student, son/daughter, friend etc.)



Mindset



Practices and techniques are extremely helpful to use in challenging situations, as a part of your pre-game ritual, or your daily routine. However, identifying your personal values and attitudes as a competitor are what make these practices stick. Your mindset is what motivates you to consistently pursue excellence in all areas of your life; improving sports performance, well-being, academics, personal relationships and more.



Gratitude

- We often get so caught up in our daily tasks and worries about the future that we forget all that has brought us into the present moment
- Specifically as an athlete, many forget the *privilege* they have to be on a roster, be enrolled in college, be physically able, etc.
- By using gratitude, you can reflect on all the things you are thankful for that helped you get to this current moment, and let it motivate you
 - For example, you're dreading team lift: pause and reflect on how your parents supported you as an athlete, how you have had access to fresh and healthy food to fuel you, your physical ability to move weights, etc.
- Gratitude can help you take a step back and recognize how so many others would die to be in your current position, making your problems seem a little less important
 - For example: someone who doesn't know where their next meal is coming from, those who fear for their safety daily, individuals who do not have access to education, etc.



Choice In The Process, Not The Result

- Can you be committed to the process of what you are doing without being emotionally attached to the result?
- Greg Maddux, one of the greatest pitchers of all time, evaluated his performance on the ratio of pitches he executed - meaning did he throw the ball in the intended location and situation he was trying to
 - There were games he executed at 80% where he gave up 5 runs and games where he executed at 50% and gave up 0 runs
 - Maddux didn't celebrate the game where he gave up 0 runs and executed at a 50% rate, because it was not aligned with his *process*
- You need to be detached from the outcome (both success and failure)
- Focus on being present when performing and acting as the best version of yourself



You're Only As Stable As What You Worship

- As athletes, your identity often becomes tied to your sport, and then ultimately to how you perform
- However, the nature of sports (and life) is that you are going to fail more than you succeed
 - For example: the best hitters in baseball fail 7/10 times at the plate
- Therefore if your identity and self-worth are based solely on success, your well-being is going to suffer
- To prevent this, separate the *who* from the *do* - you are an athlete when you show up to practice or a game, and you are someone else when it ends
 - Schedule time on your off day for self-care
 - Pursue other interests, hobbies, or skills



Go on a Negativity Diet

- You are what you consume - the more negativity you ingest, the more negative you will be
- Avoid focusing on and spending time around things that are not aligned with the version of yourself you would like to become
 - This can include doom scrolling, national news, friends or teammates that are not supportive, checking player stats and team scores excessively, etc.
- The brain has a natural negativity bias to sort out perceived threats, so you have to retrain it to be centered around identifying positive things
 - Watch other successful athletes, listen to music that makes you happy, use positive affirmations, help other people, etc.
 - This is utilizing the frequency illusion from psychology - if you just bought a red car, you will likely start seeing more red cars on the road



The Hard Part About Being The Standard Is That You Are The Standard

- If you want to be successful, you have to hold yourself accountable to the highest standards
- If you want your team to be successful, you have to demonstrate to them what it takes to be the best version of yourself, regardless of your role
- Curt Cignetti, the head coach of National Champions Indiana University, instills in his team to play to their standard of excellence
 - It doesn't matter who they are playing or what the score is in the fourth quarter, they are competing against themselves to meet their standard
 - They did not have the best recruits or most talented team, but they all bought in to pursue their collective vision of excellence, and it started with the head coach living up to the standard himself



You Are Guaranteed Nothing

- “You get up everyday, you’re entitled to nothing. Nobody owes you nothing. You can have talent but if you don’t have discipline, you don’t execute, you don’t focus, what do you get? Nothing. Nothing is acceptable but your best”
- Nick Saban
- Simply because you are on the roster, you were a starter all season, or you’re a senior, does not guarantee playing time
- If you work hard and do everything in your power to succeed, you’re still not guaranteed success
- Accept the reality that in order to be the best you have to give your best, and sometimes that might not be enough
- But by being committed to becoming the best version of yourself, you will continue to progress closer to achieving that



How You Do One Thing Is How You Do Everything

- The most successful athletes and individuals in the world aim to be the best versions of themselves in all aspects of their lives
- Successful habits are built by being detail-oriented and motivated to do everything to the best of your ability
- For college athletes, this includes being the best student, teammate, son/daughter, community member, etc. you can be
- You don't have to make your bed every morning, but success leaves clues, and the sooner you recognize everything is connected, the closer you become to achieving the best version of yourself
 - For example: take care of the non-negotiables, learn new skills, read about how to communicate better with your partner, etc.

