

A clear guide for improving mental toughness and sports performance.

A Course in Mental Toughness

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A Course in Mental Toughness:
An Introduction to a Stronger Mental Game
For Maximizing Athletic Performance



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By

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KEY 4: BE IN “PLAYER MODE”

THE ZONE OF OPTIMAL PERFORMANCE

In each sport there is an optimal zone that enables you to perform your best. The key to accessing this zone is understanding the mental and physical requirements of the sport. For example, a football nose tackle will have a higher state of arousal than a long distance runner. A tennis player will have a higher state of arousal than a golfer standing over a short putt. Four factors of optimal state are common to all athletes: Your mind is *calm* and acutely *alert* to what is happening; your body is both *relaxed* and *energized* to the proper level. While these four factors may vary in what they feel and look like, they still represent a doorway to understanding what I call “Player Mode”.

MODES

We are a very flexible species and we are the only living creatures with the gifts of self-awareness, imagination, and the capacity to foresee the consequences of our choices. We can change states, a process that I have called “**Moding**” (for more in-depth information on Moding, see the advanced program for Mental Toughness). So choosing the state (or mode) that we play in is essential to what we “see” and how we react to the environment of competition. Based on over two and a half decades of coaching, and journaling three decades of competing, I have identified 3 basic states or “modes” of competing. These modes are in line with Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (See APPENDIX A), which is critical to understanding motivation. These modes are also in line with the work of Dr. Paul MacLean and Dr. Bruce Perry and how they delineate the complexity of functions in the brain (the “triune brain”). These 3 basic modes are a simplification of what is driving the system as well as what a player may be “perceiving”. These modes are:

- 1) **S-Mode** (Surviving)
- 2) **E-Mode** (Emotionalizing)
- 3) **P-Mode** (Playing)

The following table will help you understand the *Mode* the competitor is in and what is driving the system (where the energy comes from). Remember, this is a simplification of a complex situation, but it is useful in helping the athlete raise awareness—the keystone to Mental Toughness. For what you are aware of, you can truly be responsible for. Simplicity is vital, because for most sports, there is very little time to

adjust—and very little time to waste. Momentum shifts in a fraction of a second, or on one or two key plays...

Mode	Action	Feeling	Driving Force	Behavior
S- Mode	Surviving	Tense, extremely aroused, desperate, afraid	Fear, absorbed in the fear of loss	Sluggish, tight, late reactions, out of rhythm, all or nothing type choices, freezing, “choking”
E- Mode	Emotionalizing	Over or under aroused	Emotions too high or too low or too negative, absorbed in the energy of emotions	Celebrating to extreme, pouting, moping, tantrums, over or under-estimating self
P-Mode	Playing	Relaxed, alert, calm, just right arousal	Excellence, Joy, rhythm and balance, flow, absorbed in the process of execution, absorbed in challenge and response to challenge	Executing, in rhythm, effortless, solid decision-making, composed and even, noticing oneself in the observation

The ability to recognize when you are in these modes, and then apply the tools to change modes to the optimum state is a vital to the competitor. As with all skills, you come in with a certain level of innate ability, but learning to compete in the optimum mode is indeed a skill to be learned, experienced and practiced.

In **S-Mode** you truly are in survival mode because you are driven by fear. All fear is based in survival and loss. We are wired as human to respond to this fear by fighting, flighting, or freezing. Each of these actions is very short term because they are fueled by adrenaline. Most competitions of any duration cannot be fueled by adrenalin because it simply wears you out. An adrenalin rush is just that and is followed by a crash. More importantly we are as far from the part of our brain that regulates, creates, solves

problems, intuitions, sequences, analyses language and space, and processes globally, as we could possibly be. Optimal performance requires these mental functions.

In **E-Mode** we are emotionalized. Again the peaks and valleys of this mode make it far too difficult to be consistent, relaxed, and steady in thought and emotion. While you need emotions, you cannot be absorbed by them. It is fine to have reactions (more in Key 10) and fine to enjoy your efforts, but when your effort revolves around emotions, you will perform in a less than optimum state because you are not in the present. When you emote, your thought processes are often tied to a past or future event. So if you are angry, you are angry at something that happened rather than what is happening. Anger has to be stoked and it is stoked with thoughts of what evoked the anger. When you are anxious you are thinking of what might happen (future) and what you have no control over. When you are overly excited, again you are excited about what you have done rather than what is in the present. To celebrate you recall the accomplishment (or fantasize about the finish line), yet the competition continues in the present. It requires your attention in the present (this is where the skill of Chunking can be vital for you can have a ritual in place to bring you back to the task at hand). A test to help you discover if you are in the E-Mode is:

- You sense a change in your energy level.
- You keep recycling thoughts.
- Your emotions are telling you what to do rather than you being in control of your emotions.
- You often regret what has happened when you come to be in the present.

In **P-Mode** (Playing) we have all the faculties of high performance in our consciousness. We are energizing the part of our brain that regulates, creates, problem solves, adapts, analyses, processes globally, intuitions and so on. We are contently absorbed in the process of executing. We flow between effort and demand and notice how well we execute without being absorbed in the energy of emotions. We have emotions, but are not defined by the emotion. The emotion motivates the action and the state of mind. We are present, performing in the here and now. Our mind is calm and acutely alert (focused), we are intelligently performing, our bodies are relaxed (tension-free) and aroused (energized), and we are resilient to what does not go our way without getting side-tacked by our reactions to setbacks.

MENTAL STATES

Within a competition, depending on its length, it is possible to experience different states. (If your sport involves a sprint only seconds in length, then this will be more applicable to your preparation, especially preparing to enter the optimal state before the sprint.) A state is a mode or condition of being, so it is something more than a feeling. The state may be colored by feeling, but the state represents a feedback system of thoughts and feelings. We have a feeling, and then we have a thought to go with that feeling. We then notice the thought, which reinforces the feeling. The system feeds back and then we have a mode of being. This system is *congruent*, meaning we think, feel, act, and have the physiological state of that particular mode. In everyday life we might notice this in others as patterns of being. Some people are consistently happy and joyful. Others are miserable and always talking about what is wrong with everyone and everything.

These are states of being. In competition, our being is coherent in that all the processes within us are happening at the same time and feeding back on each other throughout our body on macro and micro levels.

This congruent mode might look like this: think- feel > feel-think > think-feel > feel-think (coherent physiology) > choice > repeat...

If we fill in specifics, it might look like this:

Thought (*I missed that shot! How could I miss that? I'm awful today!*) – Feeling (*anger*) > Feeling (*anger*) – Thought (*I blew it!*) > Thought (*Why did I bother coming out today?*)— Feeling (*frustration*) > Physiology (*Blood pressure rising, increasing heart rate, rapid and shallow breathing, tension in muscles, stress building*) > Choice (*I give up...I quit...*)

Your responsibility as a competitor is to identify the states in which you perform best. You must also recognize the power of focus and how you can break this feedback loop at any point (by changing thoughts, feelings, actions, or relaxing). The following table will help you to notice how you can get yourself out of negative states and into optimal states:

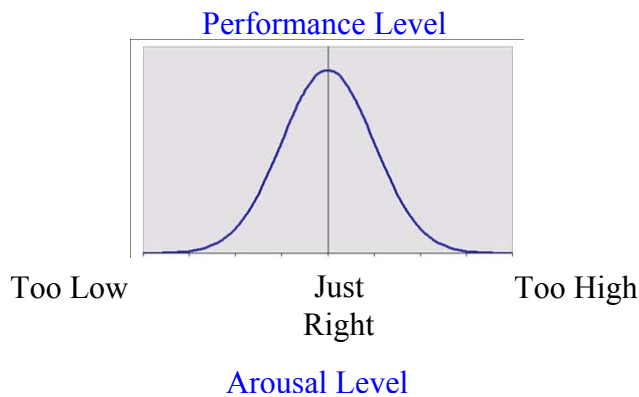
Function	Notice (examples)	Change (examples)
Thought	Negative thinking, distracted	Visualize, stop thought and think positive and productive using cues and anchors
Feeling	Anger, frustration, scared	Visualize, recall positive feelings from previous mental rehearsal
Action	Emotionalizing, tight and restricted performance	Become calm and alert via routines and rituals
Physiology	Stressed, anxious, fearful, choking	Deep breathing, relaxing routine, rituals

Changing mental states is an important skill to becoming mentally tough. This skill can be practiced so that you can change instantly to a state that allows high performance. Each state in competition has functions that go with it. If you are playing consistently or inconsistently, anxiously or calmly, confidently or unconfidently, or in flow, there are associated thoughts, feelings, actions and body chemistry that go with these states. The competitor who masters the skill of changing states and being in “Player Mode” will be successful.

Be in your body (a.k.a. bodymind), not your thoughts or emotions, for that is where your performance derives. Congruence in Player Mode is about noticing where your awareness is and constantly bringing it to the optimum state.

PSYCHIC ENERGY

Mental toughness requires us to maintain consistency throughout the performance. Just as you require energy in the form of calories to execute the physical task, you also require mental or psychic energy to execute in your optimal state. Your first responsibility is to identify the state of arousal or energy level that allows you to execute your best. You can experiment in practice with this and you can look to past performances as well. Recall a competition when you felt engaged, alert and at your mental best. It might have been a flow experience. Recalling the experience allows you to engage in that state once again. Mentally rehearsing after recalling this state (more to come on mental rehearsals in the next Key) allows you to groove the experience in your memory. When you identify and practice this state of just right arousal or level of mental energy, you are on our way to consistency.



Mental Toughness Model – Key 4	
Intelligence	Resilience
Understanding modes, and mental states	Strengthening ability to maintain “Player Mode” in the face of challenge and adversity

ACTION STEPS:

- Recall competitions when you experienced the S-Mode, E- Mode, and P-Mode (Player Mode). Are there any patterns (negative or positive) that can be identified to help you become a consistent “Player Mode” performer?
- What are some of the thoughts, beliefs, ideas and attitudes that are integral to a mentally tough mind-set of “Player Mode”? Do you need to adjust or change?
- Commit to identifying your Player Mode. Notice where your awareness is and what is absorbing your attention. Use the chart in the “Modes” section to analyze and monitor your practices and performances.
- Begin to identify factors that inhibit your performance. Which mode does this put you in? Mentally rehearse the process of being resilient to these factors and getting back to Player Mode. (Use chart in the “Mental State” section as a guide).

NOTES:

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