

# S T A T E G I E S

## *Professional*

### PRACTICE

## Mental Preparation for Daily Practice

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As coaches, there are many ways that we prepare our athletes for competition. Daily practice emphasizes not only the fundamental skills of the sport, but various offenses and defenses as well as physical conditioning. Many coaches go so far as to teach relaxation or psych-up techniques before contests. One area which is commonly overlooked, however, is the mental aspect of daily practice.

Frequently, athletes come from class or work and go directly to practice. The coach expects each athlete to be "ready" to practice, although the athlete is likely to still be thinking about the last exam or assignment at work. Since practice generally reflects game play, it is vital to instill in each athlete a frame of mind conducive to actual competition. How can we help our athletes to refocus their mental energy on the practice at hand?

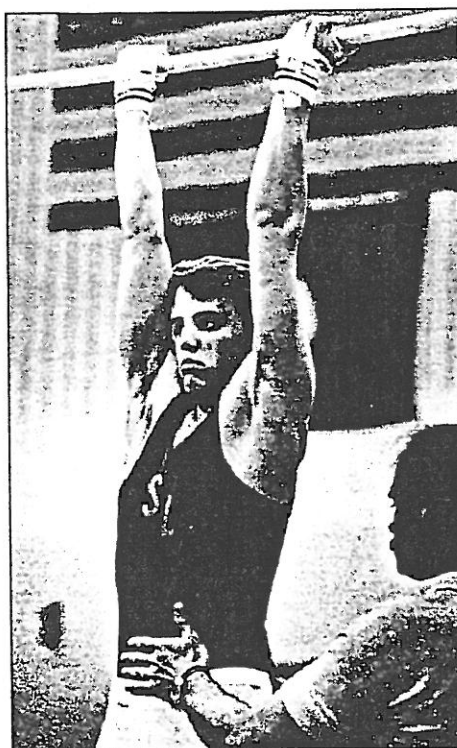
There are three stages of mental preparation which can be implemented into a daily practice schedule. The key to each stage is consistency by the coach. Within the framework of the stages, discipline and commitment are necessary.

### Stage One: Daily Individual Goal Setting

Before practice begins, have each athlete write down their individual goal for

that day. With a little organization, you can use this information to plan for the next practice, and communicate those plans to your team. Teach the athletes

*photo by Jim Kirby*



to write attainable, yet challenging goals which pertain specifically to that day's practice. You may even want to have your athletes print their goals on pieces of paper which can be taped on the walls of the gym. These can serve as

reminders throughout the practice session.

Some may argue against open goal setting because of the chance of failure. The emphasis of each goal should be the commitment toward proper execution in each drill leading up to the goal. For example, one goal may be to make 25 of 30 lay-ups in a continuous lay-up drill. Knowing what is expected, the athlete is more apt to concentrate on proper execution to succeed, thus committing to the task. If you still don't feel comfortable with open goal setting, have the athlete write out his or her goals on a small piece of paper and give them to you. The athlete needs to know that he or she is accountable for the goals, as well.

### Stage Two: "Shop Talk"

"Shop talk" is the nucleus of the daily mental preparation concept. Once the athlete steps into the locker room to change into practice gear, the sport—let's say, basketball—should be the only topic of conversation. The same is true when the athlete steps into the gym. Athletes can have a difficult time switching mental gears. If conversation while warming up is about activities outside of basketball, it is clear that the team has not made the transition to begin drills. Why waste 30 minute of



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practice waiting for everyone to start thinking basketball when thoughts of basketball can start prior to setting foot on the court? The athlete can start thinking about goals for that practice while changing clothes. If you have a team bulletin board, post a key word for the

day so each athlete can think about the importance of the word. For example, "feet" may be the key word of the day. The athlete can think about and prepare for various defensive drills which require good footwork and positioning. This kind of pre-practice "shop

talk" is critical to help athletes prepare mentally for the upcoming practice.

### Stage Three: Daily Practice Self-Evaluation

After practice, each athlete should take about 10 minutes to evaluate, in writing, his or her own performance. Questions you may want to ask include the following.

1. What was your mental and physical state prior to practice? Any distractions, injuries, soreness?
2. What was the main emphasis of practice?
3. How do you think your personal practice went ?
4. Are you making personal improvement? Why or why not? In what areas?
5. How do you view the progress of the team? Is it going well? Too slow? Inconsistent? Why?
6. What type of mental preparation are you using prior to your arrival to practice? Is it working? Do you need any adjustments?
7. How is your goal setting working?

By reviewing the practice evaluations, you can get important feedback about your athletes' perspective on practice.

### Conclusion

The three-stage approach to preparing for daily practice does not require much time of the athlete or coach. In fact, once the athlete can master the "shop talk" stage, practice will run much more efficiently and be more productive. It is also possible to change the daily goals and performance evaluations to a weekly format. Your choice of a daily or weekly format depends on the time your athletes have after practice, as well as your ability to respond to each evaluation. Either way, consistency, discipline, and commitment by both the athlete and the coaching staff will make all the difference.

### Self-Evaluation: Sample Questions

1. What was your mental and physical state prior to practice? Any distractions, injuries, soreness?
2. What was the main emphasis of practice?
3. How do you think your personal practice went ?
4. Are you making personal improvement? Why or why not? In what areas?
5. How do you view the progress of the team? Is it going well? Too slow? Inconsistent? Why?
6. What type of mental preparation are you using prior to your arrival to practice? Is it working? Do you need any adjustments?
7. How is your goal setting working?