

Mental Toughness is Important for Athletes

The concept of understanding mental toughness is evasive for many. It is a hard concept to explain; however, it is obvious when you see a player that has it.

Being mentally tough is having the psychological edge that allows one to perform at peak maximum effort and efficiency during the demands that are placed on them during training, practice or competition. Specifically, when the demands are greatest or the conditions become adverse.

Whenever the demands are the greatest is when the characteristics of mental triumph are most evident. Some of the many characteristics that are evident include:

- Self confidence
- Self-motivation
- Focus
- Concentration
- Composure
- Calmness
- Poise
- Self-Control
- Positive Energy
- Determination
- Persistence
- Leadership

This doesn't mean that the outcome is always a win. In many cases, these attributes can show up the most during a loss or during adverse conditions. But over time and with careful training the mental toughness of skilled players comes to light in championship games.

To have mental toughness one must practice attributes that lead to mental toughness. It takes time and patience under the right leadership to develop mental toughness. Parents, educators, coaches and other mentors must be systematically involved in the training process.

Also, it take failure and the ability to bounce back. Many people develop mental toughness through the experience of failure. Good parents do not want their children to fail. But today, too many blame others for the failure. Parents are quick to blame the teacher for problems in class or the coach when the child is not excelling in baseball or softball. Mental toughness cannot be developed properly when you blame others.

Here are some examples of those that worked through failure to develop mental toughness and succeed:

"Every strikeout got me closer to my next homerun." **BABE RUTH** (*Babe Ruth grew up in an orphanage. During his playing career, he struck out a record 1,330 times on his way to hitting 714 career homeruns.*)

"....Failure makes me try harder the next time." **MICHAEL JORDAN**

Ten Tips to Help Coaches Develop Mental Toughness

1. Develop a practice routine your players can depend on.

To develop mental toughness you must have a planned practice routine. Your players will work hard everyday if they know what to expect. Have a routine that works for you, your coaches, your players, and their parents. This includes what you do at practice, when you do it, and the time it takes to practice.



2. Use practice rituals that develop a strong mind set in your players.

Mental toughness comes through preparation which leads to confidence. This mind set starts with the coaches and it starts in practice. For example, coaches of older players could allow their players to have a 30 minute batting practice session everyday before they practice. Allow them to hit everyday on the field except for game days and on home game days allow your players to hit in the batting cages. The players will soon get to know this routine and be regularly prepared for batting practice. This becomes routine and part of their mind set and essential to develop mental toughness.

3. Have a few good rules and stick by them.

Don't have rules for the sake of having rules. Figure out what rules are needed and be fair enforcing them. A few good rules could involve being on time to practice, not using foul language, not throwing equipment, running out all ground balls, etc. Be prepared to enforce them equally to all team members. A "strong-willed" player is a good thing and you should use that to develop mental toughness. But don't break their spirit by constantly having rules and chastising them.

4. Have dress code requirements for games and practices.

Just like the expectation an employer has for his/her employees, demand proper dress at games and practices. For example, practice dress uniforms could include solid gray pants with a matching solid color belt and socks, matching practice shirts, practice hats, and black shoes with black shoestrings. Discipline is important to develop mental toughness and discipline in playing can start with the way your players look.



5. Work hard to develop each player's role.

Players need to know where they fit in on the team. This may take some time at the beginning of the season when players are competing for playing time, but it's important to let them know where they stand. Weekly depth charts and individual discussions will help the players understand their roles.

6. Body language speaks LOUD.

It's easy to get discouraged during a game, this is true for both the player and also a coach. Coaches must work hard to give a player confidence and the ability to keep fighting. A coach cannot control the thought process or desire of a player, but the player will not try if the coach is negative towards them. This is especially true for the coach in the third base box during the game. They must instill positive words of encouragement and desire without overloading the player's thought process with things to do.

7. Start on time and be prepared.

Having an organized practice plan and keeping a routine will help with preparation. It might help to print a practice plan outline and place it on the dugout wall prior to practice. The outline can be general with just enough information and time schedules to let players know what's going on.

This expectation can help practice move quickly. Arriving early and starting on time will send a message to your players and they will arrive early expecting to start on time.

8. Keep everyone busy.

Being prepared for practice involves keeping everyone moving. A slow sluggish practice will carry over to game performance. Crisp drills and hustling from station to station will also carry over to games.

Batting practice is usually the natural time that everyone stands around. This can be avoided by hitting in small groups, having a group of base runners, having a group hitting in the cage (or hitting waffle balls on the side). This will leave fewer players in the field and they will have to hustle after balls that are hit

During scrimmages post an itinerary letting players know when they are hitting and what position they are playing at different times during the scrimmage. Allow time for pitchers to warm up. Players not involved in the scrimmage or keeping up with foul balls could be allowed to hit in the cage.

9. Don't burn them out from over-practice or over-play.

It's hard to develop mental toughness in players that do not have a passion to play. They must have energy that is obvious. This is why some really good athletes never develop mental toughness in game situations, their energy level is low.

Do not dull the passion of the player to play by burning them out during practice or over the season. Keep drill times short. Young players will lose interest quickly so work hard to keep them engaged mentally. It's impossible to develop mental toughness if your players cannot focus and concentrate on the item at hand at practices.

During batting practice make sure groups move quickly and that the batting practice pitcher is throwing strikes. If you plan to practice for two hours, stop it at that time. If you need to run or condition at the end of practice, stop a few minutes early to allow time for the conditioning.

It might also be a good idea to plan days off during the season. A day off in the middle of the week during a tough late stretch in the season may help add an energy level to your team and help them maintain that "edge" that is needed to develop mental toughness in competition.

10. Develop concentration and good habits in practice.

Have a purpose for everything you do in practice. Give players reasons to concentrate. For example, during batting practice, place runners on base and have hitters practice situational hitting, moving runners into scoring position or scoring them.

On deck hitters can be practicing their load and timing with the pitcher. Have base runners work on proper leads at each base. Have infielders throw ground balls to first base (or second depending on the situation), but outfield can throw the balls hit to them to an outfield bucket in shallow center field.

Developing the mind set in knowing what to do before the pitch is made in practices will translate into the same thing during games and this will help develop the mental toughness of your players.

Overall, be patient and consistent. To develop mental toughness it will take persistence on the part of the coach and the parents. Hopefully, they are doing their part and you are only reinforcing what they teach at home

