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The Less Obvious Factor

“I always stress condition with my basketball players. I don’t mean physical condition only. You cannot attain and maintain physical condition unless you are morally and mentally conditioned.”

—John Wooden, college basketball coach

If you are like many Americans, you will be tuned in to the 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games in the months of February and March. It is amazing to watch—with much awe and respect—as these elite athletes sled, ski, jump and skate, with speed, precision and grace. In observing these Olympians and Paralympians (as well as other elite-level athletes), their physical and technical prowess is glaringly evident. The speed and agility of speedskaters and downhill skiers, the strength and technical skills of bobsled and luge athletes, the technical proficiency of snowboarders and the endurance and technical precision of figure skaters is apparent to all who observe their performances. Knowing the physical and technical strengths of elite-level athletes can be an asset to any developing athletes who are working to enhance their skills. But you already know this, right? It is what you do on a consistent basis—you identify the physical and technical skills you need to better develop to improve your performance, then address them in your daily training.

Less evident, however, are the mental skills and characteristics that play a role in the performance of Olympians, Paralympians, and other elite-level athletes. When watching these athletes, we cannot see their thoughts, focus, confidence, anxiety, attitude and self-talk like we can see physical and technical characteristics. Because of this, there may be a tendency to only equate performance to observable skills and disregard the other skills that also impact performance—things like mental skills.

If we can’t observe these mental skills, how do we know they impact performance? That is a good question. Over the years, there has been much research that has looked at whether there are psychological characteristics that are correlated with successful athletic performance. From this research, we have a better understanding of the psychological skills and characteristics that seem to relate to

successful performance. Note that it is not suggested that having these characteristics cause the ensuing performance, but rather they seem linked to the ensuing performance. Regardless, having an awareness of the skills that relate to enhanced performance can be an asset to you as you strive to enhance your own athletic performance.

Without further ado, let us take a look at these mental characteristics related to successful athletic performance, as summarized by Krane and Williams (1):

- High self-confidence
- Arousal management
- Feeling “in control”
- Total concentration
- Focus on the task at hand
- Productive perfectionism
- Positive attitude and thoughts about performance
- Strong determination and commitment
- Detailed planning for competition that includes setting goals, imagery and practicing coping skills

Read slowly and repeatedly through the list. Which characteristics describe you? Which characteristics should you work to develop and/or improve? Make use of this research and hone your mental as well as your physical skills. ■

References

1. Krane V., and Williams J. Psychological characteristics of peak performance. J. Williams (Ed.), Applied sport psychology: Personal growth to peak performance (pp. 169 – 188), New York, NY: McGraw Hill. 2010.

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