

The Mental Factor in Weight Training

Bill Starr: 2006

Mind, Muscle and Might

For athletes to be successful in their chosen sports, they require many attributes. Having a high degree of athleticism, which includes such things as coordination, balance, quickness and a sense of timing during the performance of a physical skill, is key. Having a strong body that can endure repeated impacts in contact sports as well as the ability to play longer at a more intense level are genuine advantages. That's the physical side of the coin.

Then there's the mental side, which, as many great athletes contend, is even more important than the physical. I happen to agree. During my competitive years in Olympic weightlifting, I saw countless examples of lifters who were clearly not as strong as their opponents emerge the winner due to their mental superiority.

At the pinnacle of every sport the difference between the competitors is minute. All have similar qualities in terms of athletic ability and sport skills, yet invariably one or two always seem to come out on top. Lance Armstrong is a perfect example.

In high-dollar sports, psychologists are frequently brought in to help players who are struggling to overcome their problems. They obviously have all the necessary tools to excel, but they're faltering badly. Hypnosis and other forms of inducing a state in which the athletes are very responsive to suggestion are used, and in nearly every case it works. The players snap out of their funk and return to their previous champion caliber.

And yet I'm fairly sure that very few readers have the means to seek out professional assistance when their confidence has hit bottom. They have to figure out how to correct the problem on their own. The good news is, it can be done and will not cost you a dime.

Many are of the opinion that having self-assurance is innate—either you have it or you don't. While it's true that some do possess a higher degree of natural confidence than others, that doesn't mean the trait can't be improved. It's a skill, and as with any other skill, the more you practice it, the more proficient you will become at using it in your sports activities, including weight training.

In team sports an athlete's confidence can be bolstered by coaches and teammates, but that isn't quite the same for individual sports. True, your coach can encourage you and provide some form suggestions, but you are very much alone during the performance of your event. And while an athlete in a team sport can be a member of a championship squad without playing a significant role, the individual-sport athlete relies 100 percent on his or her own accomplishments. So self-assurance is more critical to success for those who go it alone.

Nevertheless, the methods I'm about to present can also be useful to those who play team sports. They're not restricted to those who participate in individual sports requiring independent action. At Johns Hopkins, all of the members of the Olympic weightlifting team also played football. I taught them how to mentally prepare for a contest, and once they learned that skill, they used it to their benefit when football season rolled around.

I've mentioned that practice is necessary in order to become better at this skill, and so is patience. Some think it's a magic formula. It's not. Time must be spent because proficiency doesn't come overnight. And that's exactly why the majority of those who start practicing mental rehearsal don't stick with it. A mental skill is harder to achieve because it has to be done precisely each and every time. You might get stronger even though you use poor technique on some exercise, but that's not the case with a mental exercise.

It also needs to be understood that some are able to master this skill rather easily while others must spend a longer time working on it. I've observed that those who took part in a wide range of competitive sports when they were younger, and did well in them, have an easier time dealing with the stress of competition than those who didn't play sports when they were young. Success breeds success.

One of the nice bonuses of learning how to use mental rehearsal is that you can also apply it to day-to-day activities—to help you plan for an upcoming hectic schedule or deal with an invasion of in-laws during a holiday or a bunch of midterms or finals. In other words, it's a really good skill to have whether you're engaged in a competitive activity or just desiring a stress-free life.

I call the process mental rehearsal. Others use similar methods and give it other names, but a rose is a rose. As I mentioned, it can be used for a wide range of activities, but I'll restrict this article to how it can benefit weight training and competitive lifting. I should mention that I always did a form of mental preparation—even before I got serious about Olympic lifting. When I wrestled and boxed, I would review the fundamentals and try to pump up my self-esteem prior to going into the ring or on the mat.

Once I started devoting all my energy to lifting, I continued to use this same idea—going over my intended attempts and thinking about the keys. I did it in a perfunctory manner, however, and never set aside a specific period of time to mentally plan for the contests. I'm sure it helped some, although I'm not sure how much. I was missing lifts that I should have made.

The value of this discipline was brought into perspective as I was getting ready to compete in the '66 North Americans, which were held in York, Pennsylvania. It was by far the biggest meet I'd ever qualified for and I was understandably apprehensive. The month before, Bob Bednarski, Russ Knipp and I had driven to Boone, North Carolina, to take part in a contest. As every lifter knows, a certain amount of bonding takes place on a road trip, especially a long one, so we all got to know one another and became friends.

The night before the North Americans, Tommy Suggs, Russ and I gathered at Bednarski's trailer at Brookside Park, only a few miles from Bob Hoffman's residence near Dover. That's the site of the annual York Barbell Company picnic. Sometime during the casual affair, Russ pulled me into a back room and asked what I planned on lifting the next day. I told him, and he prompted me to go through the three lifts step by step from the first warmup to the final attempt. He told me to visualize each lift as I verbalized it and focus on the form points. I worked my way through the press and snatch but never got to the clean and jerk because Barski insisted we join the rest of the party.

At the contest I felt extremely confident. I proceeded to make all my presses and snatches, setting personal records on both. I was on a roll. That is, until I got to the clean and jerks. My high confidence level disappeared. I only made my opener. There was no doubt in my mind that if I had rehearsed my clean and jerks as I had the other two lifts, I would have succeeded with every attempt that night.

I was convinced that going through the lifts and picturing each one from start to finish was a tremendous asset, yet I couldn't impose on Russ to talk me through the preparation every time. I had to figure out how to make it work on my own. I began mentally going through my planned attempts and highlighting the various form points on the night prior to a meet. It did help, but not for the significant contests, like the '68 Olympic Trials, where the stakes were so high.

When I tried to go through my intended attempts, I would get so nervous that my pulse rate would soar and I could feel my muscles tighten. No matter how hard I tried to relax, I couldn't, particularly when I got to the final lifts. The rehearsals did me no good at all, because I just wasn't able to relax enough to focus on my lifting.

I knew that I was missing a critical part of the process, but I didn't have a clue what it might be. Then I stumbled across it. I was leafing through a book on martial arts, hoping to glean enough information to put together an article for *Strength & Health*, when I came across a chapter on systematic breathing and relaxation. Bingo, I had found the piece of the puzzle I was needing to make my mental rehearsals bear fruit. Or at least I thought I had. In two weeks there was a meet in Wilmington, Delaware. I would put the idea to the test. I'd like to say I did great at the contest. I didn't. I was full of confidence, however, and basically missed some attempts simply because I was not yet strong enough. My mind, on the other hand, was more than prepared because I was able to go through almost an hour of mental rehearsal without getting too nervous to continue.

It was all due to the breathing. As I began the procedure described in the book, I felt my body relax. Then I started my intended attempts, thinking more of the technique than the numbers. Whenever I began to get anxious, I would start the deep breathing again and stay with it until I was once again calm. It was exactly what I was looking for and was so simple that I wanted to kick myself for not figuring it out on my own. But that's the story of my life.

The reason that the deep breathing enabled me to avoid becoming anxious is the basic fact that the mind can only concentrate on one thing at a time. I learned that in my college psychology classes but had never considered it to be instrumental in helping me prepare for a contest. When I was focusing on inhaling and exhaling deeply, I wasn't able to think about my lifts. As I said, it's a skill, and the longer I practiced it, the easier it was for me to go through all my intended attempts without getting anxious and having to stop and start over.

Eventually, I gave little attention to the numbers and concentrated on technique. I didn't even set my opening attempts firmly but kept them flexible. I might start with 270 if my warmups went well or 260 if they didn't, reminding myself of the often forgotten truism in competition that it doesn't matter where you start, only where you end up. I also didn't lock in my second or third attempt either, so I could change them according to what my competitors were doing without affecting my confidence.

I began using the deep breathing during my warmups and before going on platform. It served two useful functions. It enabled me to calm down and conserve my energy for the upcoming attempt, and it helped me focus on the small form keys—both most useful when 10 pounds often means the difference between winning and watching the victory ceremony from the audience.

So here's a short course on learning how to relax that anyone can master if he or she is willing to put in some practice time. It's just as useful for athletes who are primarily interested in improving their training lifts as it is for competitive athletes.

Find a quiet place. For some that poses a problem—like a friend of mine who has four young children or an athlete who lives in a frat house. My advice to both: Go sit in your car. I prefer a dark or dimly lit room and want it to be as quiet as possible. Many people find light music agreeable, but you should stay away from anything that distracts from the task at hand. No radio or TV, and unplug the phone and fax.

If you can sit on a fat pillow and assume the lotus position, do so. That places you in an ideal posture from which to breathe deeply. The main thing is to be comfortable, however. You cannot concentrate on your breathing when some part of your body is screaming in pain. So you can sit in your recliner or even lie down.

Take a few moments to try to let your mind go blank. Keep your back flat, and lift your head slightly. That will enable you to take deeper breaths. Slow and steady, draw in air and while doing so, try and picture your lungs expanding. When they're full, suck in a bit more, then hold your breath for eight to 10 seconds.

In the beginning you may not be able to hold the air in for that long, but with practice you will. Don't let the air gush out. Rather, slowly release it, emitting a soft whooshing sound. When your lungs feel empty, contract your diaphragm and squeeze out a tad extra. Do not inhale for five or six seconds, and after that you must resist the urge to suck in huge quantities of air. Instead, inhale slowly, as you did with your first breath.

The holding times are merely guidelines. What you are trying to learn is the rhythm of the exercise. Once you accomplish that, you will be able to extend the amount of time it takes you to fully inhale and exhale as well as hold the air in your lungs during the oxygen-starvation period. As you breathe in and out, concentrate on the action of your diaphragm. Visualize it expanding in your relaxing abdomen while you're inhaling and contracting far up in your chest cavity when exhaling.

Once you're totally focused on your rhythmic breathing and the motion of your diaphragm, you won't be able to think about anything else, and that's the idea.

After you've completed three cycles, turn your thoughts to your upcoming workout or competition. Since I've covered a great deal about contest preparation, I'll show how to get ready for the next session in the weight room. While I said that I eventually stopped fixing specific numbers to the various lifts in a meet, I do want to lock them in for training. That's because you're only competing against yourself in the gym and should know exactly what poundages you're aiming for at any given workout.

Write down all your projected warmups and top-end lifts before you do your mental rehearsal. That gives you a tangible game plan. Otherwise, it's hit or miss.

Our imaginary strength athlete this month is a football player who's in the final weeks of his off-season strength program. On Monday he squatted 450x5, so on Friday he wants to do 460x3. Here's how he plans to work his way up to that weight: 135x5, 225x5, 315x5, 385x3, 435x3 and 460x3. It's no trouble for him to commit these to memory.

On Thursday night he sets aside 30 minutes to do his mental rehearsal. After three cycles of rhythmic breathing, he's relaxed and goes through each of his six sets in deliberate fashion. He visualizes the bar being loaded, placing his feet just right, locking his back tightly and making each lift with power to spare. He knows he's strong enough to handle 460 for a triple since he's already done 10 pounds less for five. The only thing that can keep him from making his final set is a breakdown in technique.

So he does another cycle of deep breathing, then proceeds to go through his squat routine again. This time he doesn't focus on the amount of weight on the bar but rather concentrates on key form points. No more than three, however. More than that will only complicate the execution of the lift.

Recalling that he has a tendency to round his back on the heavy weights, which often results in failure, he built the potential form flaw into his preparation. One key for descending (keep back extremely tight), one for the initial drive out of the bottom (lift chest up), and a final one for bringing the bar to the finish (no hesitation through the middle). Of course, everyone has his own set of keys, but this works for our athlete. I tell my athletes to imagine that they are taking a video of themselves and try to picture themselves doing each and every rep in perfect form.

When our athlete walks in the weight room on Friday, he's extremely confident that he will succeed with the 460 pounds and that's way more than half the battle already won.

Yuri Vlasov, the great Russian Olympic lifting heavyweight of the '50s and '60s, was also a published author. He wrote about being able to center his mental focus on lifting a certain poundage so intently that he felt as if he were standing in a circle of bright light, with everything around him blacked out, even sound. I had no idea what he was talking about until it happened to me. It was at the William Penn High School in York. As I stood over the bar, it was just as he described. All I could see was the center of the bar, and I was standing in a pool of vivid light. It was a heady, euphoric, almost transcendental sensation that I dearly wished I could capture more often. Sadly, I only did so a couple of times after that. But the point is, if I could achieve that ideal state, so can you. It's not magic; it's practice.

Even if you have no desire to lift heavy objects or to compete in any type of strength event and only want to maintain strength fitness, it's still beneficial to do some mental rehearsal for your training. It will help you make your next workout much more productive. During my hour commute to Johns Hopkins I would preview my planned workout. I didn't do any breathing exercises, since I wasn't going to be trying any personal records, although I certainly could have while I sat for several minutes waiting for all the lights to turn green. When I got to the weight room, I knew exactly what I had to do and was ready to do it.

One final note: The rhythmic breathing is an excellent way to relax and reduce stress, whether it's the physical or mental variety. For several years I trained in non-air-conditioned gyms in Texas and Maryland. In both places the temperature often hit 100 degrees with matching humidity. I had difficulty getting my pulse and respiratory rates back down to normal. I dutifully swallowed a fistful of multiple minerals and vitamin C, but it still took an hour or longer for my body to calm down. Then I remembered the deep breathing. Within five minutes my breathing and pulse rate had dropped appreciably. As I said, the simplest solution to a problem is often overlooked.

So whether you're trying to hurl a shot out of the stadium, pole-vault over a tall building, be the first human to elevate a half ton overhead or merely enjoy being fit and strong enough to take long hikes in the country, start incorporating some mental rehearsal into your routines. By harnessing more of your mental energy, you'll be able to achieve your goal much faster. It's time well spent.