



Find Your Zone Every Match

Guide to Consistent Optimum Performance

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Background

What you are about to read are techniques that I develop over the years from classes, books and experimentation that I believe were the reasons I was able to go from NCAA All-American to NCAA Champion.

In my competitive career I know I lost some matches due to nerves. Those losses were hard to accept because I didn't lose them from being the lesser wrestler, but rather from not representing myself to my fullest potential.

Obviously, I had won some big matches and I practiced daily with some of the best wrestlers in the world, so I knew what I was capable of. This only made it harder to accept the losses that I thought I was capable of winning. Wrestlers train at the hardest sport in world for the glory and when they fall short of what they know they are capable of it can be very unsettling.

Finding your optimum mental state consistently for competition can be difficult. Getting yourself in the proper mindset is important for not only "big" competitions, but also against opponents you routinely beat. Developing a routine that will get you to your optimum metal state on a consistent basis will allow you to reach your highest accolades and also keep you from losing competitions due to overconfidence. Wrestlers work hard in the practice room to reap the rewards on game day so make sure you are armed with a strategy to get you ready every time.

Before my senior year in college I made it my mission to make sure I was prepared to represent myself to my fullest potential every match, in order to win a NCAA Championship before I left the University of Iowa. Between my junior and senior year I used several experiences to develop the routine that took me over the top. Three experiences stood out to me most. That summer I went to watch the World Championships in Atlanta, GA, I read a book on mental preparation that was referred to me by my former teammate Terry Steiner, and the first semester of my senior year I took a coaching class that had a section on mental training for athletics. I used the knowledge I gained from those experiences to develop a mental preparation routine that took me from 2x All-American to NCAA Champion even though I had two defending NCAA Champs in my bracket and went into the national tournament the 5th seed.

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Previously, I had struggled to consistently find my optimum mental state before matches. Sometimes I would feel great and sometimes I wouldn't. I had no set routine that I had complete faith in so I was always trying to remember what I had done before a previous match where I had wrestled well. The lacks of consistency in my mental preparation lead to losing matches against lesser opponents as well as not getting the big wins.

I will describe the routine that I used and I know many other highly successful athletes use in order to prepare yourself to compete at your highest level every competition. This book is not about winning, it is about tapping into your own personal greatness. If you are putting the time in at all areas of your life and you use these mental preparation strategies you will most likely experience great success and personal satisfaction in wrestling.

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Chapter One: What is Mental Toughness

I used all of the info in this book in my journey as a competitor where I was a 3x All-American, Big Ten Champion NCAA Championship under Dan Gable at the University of Iowa. I have also taught this information to my wrestlers, in the Christiansburg Wrestling Program, where we have won the past 12 consecutive state team titles, had many individual state champions, dozens of wrestlers go on to wrestle in college and produced multiple high school national champions. By no means do I think I know everything but I do feel that I have developed a keen eye for what breeds success and failure in wrestling. Take this information to heart, truly apply it to your daily practices and competitions and you will be well on your way to tapping into your fullest potential on a consistent basis.

What is mental toughness? It's the ability to compete to the best of your ability no matter what the situation. Developing this skill will not only provide athletes with the ability to pull upsets and win big matches, but eliminate the possibility of losing to an inferior opponent. The key to this type of toughness is a consistent pre-match routine which leaves the athlete focused, relaxed and ready to compete every time they step on the mat.

The most elusive skill for an athlete to control is their state of mind. Most athletes are not taught a step-by-step process to prepare for competition. Many times at national and world level events there are multiple athletes in each weight class that are physically capable of being the best but it is the wrestler able to tap into the most potential and represent themselves at the highest level that weekend that wins. The reason rare athletes are able to win 4 NCAA Titles or string together multiple World and Olympic Titles is because of the gaps in mental preparation, not so much physical.

Developing skills like strength, conditioning and technique typically produce direct results. Most coaches are qualified and confident at instructing skills and strategy for their sport, but many times overlook or don't know how to teach proper mental preparation. In order to compete well consistently, athletes need to have a systematic routine that they use on competition days to find "the zone."

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Chapter Two: Everything Starts with a Great Warm up

Have you ever seen someone you knew was in good shape fall apart in the third period? Have you ever lost the first match of a tournament because you just didn't do anything? These are all signs of an athlete that did not shock their system with a great warm-up.

Benefits to a Great Warm-up

Detect Any Issues - If something is going to go wrong it needs to happen during the warm-up. If a wrestler didn't eat right or get enough sleep they will be susceptible to running out of gas during the first match of the day. If a wrestler can deal with these issues through a warm-up and proper recovery they will be ready to go even on their worse days.

Wake the Mind & Body Up - Even if nutrition, sleep and all the other little things have been done right the warm up is still necessary to get the mind and body properly prepared for the battles that lie ahead. Use a great warm-up to not become the victim of the first round upsets and maybe pick some up.

Below I will outline the flow of a good match day warm-up. There are many ways to skin this cat and athletes should work with their coach to develop their own routine designed around familiar skills and drills.

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Getting Loose

Warm up: Jog, tumble, gymnastics, stretch, body weight exercises and sprints. Wrestlers should be sweating before they move on.

Light Drill: Start light in neutral position

Starting to Bang: Pick up the pace and make sure to focus on set ups, moving hands & feet, explosive shots, explosive finishes, a variety of finishes, front headlocks and short offense. This is a time that the wrestler needs to focus on what THEY are good at, not learn new things.

Top/Bottom: Move to the mat and focus on your best top and bottom holds. Be sure to explode on the bottom position and work your breakdowns as well as your turns & pins from the top.

Prepare for Battle

High Intensity Drills: Develop drills in each position the simulate match pace. These should be designed to focus on techniques the wrestler or team uses and should get the heart rate up to a match pace. Often times these are drills we have been working on in practice that focus on areas the team needs to become better, that counter a competitor's style or encourage the style of wrestling we are striving for.

Hand Fighting: Wrestlers should perform a couple live hand fighting periods. This will prepare them to get physical and continue to wake them up mentally and physically.

Live Wrestling or High Intensity Sparring: Some wrestlers like to perform a live match with a teammate during the warm up. Other wrestlers may feel more comfortable in a more controlled setting and want to spar instead. Either way the wrestler needs to do something to make them blow the cobwebs completely out. I have seen this effectively done with either a live match or hard sparring, but the wrestlers need to push themselves during this portion of the warm-up.

Sprints: Perform several explosive sprints. There should be breaks between each sprint and focus on the explosion, rather than a constant pace. Prepare the body for explosive movements, while they are tired.

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Get Focused

Talk and Nutrition – Directly after the warm up is a good time for a coach to gather and talk with wrestlers or the team. Give the wrestlers instructions and try to set their mind for the day. The wrestler's shirt should be soaked after a good warm up. Having a spare shirt is wise. They should re-hydrated and eat a snack if they need one.

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Chapter Three: Be a Kitty

Have you ever noticed how explosive your housecat is? You may have also noticed how relaxed he or she is. This is because if cats were nervous and fidgety, their fast twitch muscles would wear them out in no time. If your mind is tight and nervous your body will follow suit, and TENSE MUSCLES CANNOT BE EXPLOSIVE. The purpose of the warm up is to loosen you up physically so you can perform many dynamic, and powerful motions in quick succession, however many people negate this effect by filling themselves with anxiety and other distractions. From the end of the warm up until pre-match, your main goal is to remain absolutely calm and relaxed. This ability is one of the key distinctions between the competitors who can't seem to win a close match and those who can't seem to lose one.

Tips and Tricks to Stay Relaxed Under Stressful Situations

Get out of the gym – Find a spot under the bleachers, in the cafeteria or hallway, anywhere away from the excitement and action. Sitting in the bleachers or mat side watching all the action can wear a wrestler out. Talking about opponents, thinking about what they do, having a parent or coach tell you that your opponent is tough and you need to look out for this and that will all lead to anxiety and poor performances. Your job at this time is to get your mind off wrestling and relax.

Three Strategies to Stay Calm:

1. Listen to calming/relaxing music or audio.
2. Talk with buddies/teammates about something other than wrestling.
3. Breathing techniques and visualization.

If the first two don't work than you need to have a routine to fall back on to deal with the anxiety and negative emotions. Learning breathing and visualization techniques will enable an athlete to take control over their mind set.

Here is a description of a technique I learned in a Sports Psychology class in college that I used to fall asleep before my NCAA finals match. Before the biggest competition of my life I fell asleep and woke up feeling like a million dollars when it was time to get ready for my match.

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Arm Yourself with a Calming Strategy

Here is how it is done:

- Find a quiet calm environment
- Close your eyes and lay in a comfortable position
- Begin to take deep breaths in the nose out the mouth
- Start at your head and work to your toes focusing on each body part becoming completely relaxed in sinking into the floor.
- Begin to visualize yourself in a calming environment. This can be on a beach, in the woods, pretty much anywhere you think would be relaxing to you.
- Continue to focus on the breathing.
- Don't let anything related to wrestling enter your mind.
- Focus on the details of your environment. Feel the wind blowing, the smells familiar to this place, the sounds etc...

Develop a routine like this to fall back on before the biggest competitions, when your mind and emotions are hardest to control. If an athlete can do this they will find themselves competing at their highest levels on a consistent basis.

Make sure the wrestler lets a coach or teammate know where they will be and when to alert them of when it is time for their pre-match routine. Athletes will fall asleep using this technique and will wake up with a feeling of complete rejuvenation. This is much better than pacing around between matches stressing over what is to come.

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Chapter Four: Put on Your War Paint

20-30 minutes before an athlete competes they need to begin to dial in mentally and physically and prepare for battle. A short warm up routine that gets blood to the muscles using body weight exercise and sport specific drills should be performed.

Focusing on the moment and not overlooking the task at hand is also important. Don't look ahead to other opponents or teams; focus in on what is right in front of you. Using a strategy to remove negative thoughts from your mind and replace with positive ones is extremely important during this phase.

Brainwashing: Dealing with Negative Thoughts

Everyone has negative thoughts before they compete. Some negative things that go through your mind might be; thinking about your opponent's offense too much, what if I don't wrestle well; my legs feel tired, I don't feel good, and what if I get tired on the mat, the list could go on and on. The way I cleared my head of negative thoughts was to imagine a train going by with open boxcars and anytime a negative thought would enter my head I would kick that thought into an open boxcar and it would be carried away. I once read an article written by Olympic Champion Brandon Slay where he used the same sort of technique. He would imagine himself at home plate and anytime a negative thought would enter his mind he would imagine it was a big baseball and hit it out of the stadium. I think you get the picture, no matter how goofy it may seem, you need to find a way that works for you to drive the negative thoughts out of your head. Make sure to always replace those negative thoughts with a positive one. Examples of some things you can replace the negative thoughts with are; picture yourself executing your best offense, imagine hustling during your match and feeling your opponent wear down, you might even imagine yourself getting taken down and immediately getting an escape and taking your opponent back down, prepare yourself to react in a positive way to any adversity you might encounter during the match.

Physically Prepare

Wrestlers should get their feet moving and the blood flowing into the muscles. Do this by grabbing a teammate and drilling, hand fighting, body weight exercise and shadow wrestling. This doesn't have to be as intense as the first warm up of the day.

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Mentally Prepare

Think About Your Wrestling - During this time a wrestler should start thinking about wrestling. They should think of their best offense and visualize themselves in many different situations.

Have Plan to Deal with Negative Thoughts - Wrestlers should have mental tactics they can use to kick any negative thoughts out of their head.

Calm, Powerful and Confident - Fight the feeling of anxiety and strive for a feeling of calm, powerful and confident to overcome your mind and body.

Flip the Switch - Right before a wrestler starts to wrestle they should have some action that says it is go time. I have seen many different triggers, from jumping in the air to slapping themselves. This is when everything goes blank, the whistle is blown and instincts take over.

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Chapter Five: Have a Mantra

Athletes need to have a quick way to deal with negative thoughts during competition. If things are going bad or doubts are taking over the athlete needs to be able to deal with this in a split second and get back on track. Having a mantra is a great way to do this.

What is a mantra? A mantra is a commonly repeated word or phrase. During my competitive years the Nike “Just Do It” commercials were big. During hard workouts when my mind was telling me to slow down I would just repeat this phrase over and over and keep on going. **If you focus on your mantra it is hard for anything else to get in your head.** This technique should be mastered in practice and will become natural during competition. Athletes can control their thoughts and stay on task by quickly referencing a familiar phrase, repeating and letting their instincts take over.

In closing, realize that most successful athletes use the types of strategies discussed in this article on a regular basis. It is easy to think that someone is just really tough and that is why they always compete so well. This is not the case; toughness is a skill. It takes a lot of planning, dedication and practice to develop the mental skills that will deliver you to “the zone” on a consistent basis. I strongly encourage you to use these strategies and tactics on a regular basis because it takes time to master them. Most of the skills I talked about were mastered in the practice room or outside of wrestling and then used on match day. They were not simply implemented successfully on match day. To get the most out of this guide you should put some thought and planning into developing your own personal game plan and begin perfecting it.

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Worksheets

Use this worksheet to develop your own routine on match day. You should use warm up strategies, techniques and drills you are accustomed to using in your daily practice routines. If you want to get them most out of the information you need to put some thought into what you will do before matches and this guide will help. It may help to do this with a coach.

Warm up:

Light Drill:

Starting to Bang:

Top/Bottom:

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Simulating Live

High Intensity Drills:

Hand Fighting:

Live Wrestling or High Intensity Sparring:

Sprints:

Nutrition & Talk

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Strategies to Deal with Negative Thoughts:

What is Your Mantra?

Where is Your Calming Place?
