



## Pre-game Mental Preparation

Coach, your influence on pre-game mental preparation of your athletes will vary from small to large, depending on each athlete. I know you want to have the most positive effect on performance, yet many of us need a reminder from time to time. So I've put together some of the top approaches for you to consider.

React or think? Would you rather your athletes react without thinking, or think without reacting? They'll do one or the other. Reacting without thinking is faster and it displays the response they've practiced the best. The key here is that they trust their preparation so their mind can be quiet instead of thinking. That means they believe "I'm ready to react automatically to what needs to be done". You can tell because their eyes will be quiet and focused. You can also tell because their movements are quick and their approach is decisive (reacting, not thinking). No amount of shouting and hollering, or loud music will produce trust in preparation. Solid and well understood practice is where it starts. Then the night before and hours before competition, many accomplished athletes prefer minimal distractions so they can let their mind and eyes be quiet, or to play a video in their minds (visualize) of what they will do well.

Clear expectations. When your athletes know just what their coach expects in the competitive situations they will face, their mind is more likely to turn off and let their body react. This happens more consistently when they have practiced to the point of becoming automatic with what they will do in games. Your part in this is explaining strategy so they "get it" and giving them enough solid and well understood practice time to become accomplished at it. If you are short on practice time, give them video clips to watch, visualization to do, and ask them to diagram what you want them to do. These and other off-ice approaches to mastery produce trust on the ice and accelerate performance growth. Another part you play is to make wise decisions about introducing new strategy or making changes without enough practice time – only do it when you are certain it will help performance. As for adjustments during a game, explain the changes as an extension of what they already do well as much as possible, and they are more likely to trust their ability to accomplish it.

Handle it well. Aiming for perfect can be a solid approach to practice goals. However, since there are so few or no perfect games played in the history of hockey thus far, teach your athletes to respond to their mistakes and less-than-perfect play in a way that continues to bring out their best performance. When you say things like, "That's not like you," or "I see what you wanted to do there," or "Try that again and you'll get it," you help them remain focused on the good and great things they want to do. Hearing you

say them consistently, your athletes will then learn to say supporting comments like these to themselves and stay in the frame of mind that consistently brings their best performance to the game.

A great idea. Ask your athletes what they were thinking about, focusing on, and saying to themselves the night before and just before the best games they ever played. Better yet, have them write it down and give it to you. That's a good start to knowing what pre-game mindset works best for them. Tell them how much you believe it is a great idea for them to prepare mentally, much like before their best performances, and just play the game with the great reactions. In what you do and say, show them that you trust in their preparation and believe they are "Ready to react automatically and play great hockey."

What I've recommended here may be a move away from "tough stuff" like yelling and criticizing that you've seen work before. Based on the research and the experience of many of the top athletes at all levels, committing to these recommendations will produce important and valuable benefits. Your athletes will become more responsible for their own performance, they will be more positive and burnout less, they'll play more consistently at a higher level, confidence will go up and stay higher, highly talented players will be attracted to this style, and parents will notice you investing more positively in their sons and daughters.

In the next article of this series confidence will be the focus – what it is and how you and your athletes can build it to a high level and keep it there. Coaching confident athletes will also be covered.

By; Bill Allyson, Ph.D