

WINNING THE MENTAL GAME:

It is often said that wrestling is 90% mental. This is key...and it is also very true.

If you don't think you can beat someone yet...then admit it. It is tough to go from not placing in State to winning Nat'ls without 'baby-stepping' yourself to that final goal. Set a goal to GO CLOSE with those kids. Don't worry about beating them yet. Once you get within 3-4 points of them, THEN you are ready to beat them. It is not an ALL or NONE deal. That is a loser mentality.

I believe we lack confidence because we focus so much on winning and we are TERRIFIED of losing. Bottom line is that the only one that REALLY cares about your wrestling match is you. Not everyone is staring at you after you lose. Furthermore, we do not have absolute control over winning no matter how good we are. Our opponent has something to say about it, the official can make a mistake, the clock worker can mess up, you can blow your knee out during the match, etc. Focus on what you DO have total control over.

Examples of what you do have total control over:

You have control over wrestling smart, battling your opponent and being smart and calm throughout the match, etc. You also have control over whether or not you pressure your opponent and stay after him. You have control over the amount of time you spend developing your technique and skills. You have control over jogging back to the middle or walking back with your head down. You have control over fighting for the first takedown and fighting off bottom. You have control over whether or not you give up your arms on bottom or fighting to keep them free. You have control over many things. If you focus on some of what I have outlined for you, and you still lose...then accept the loss and move on. Your goal is not to win every match for the rest of your life anyway...that isn't realistic. All best football teams lose, all best baseball players strike out...you get the idea. Your goal is to go 4-0 at the State Championships.

Don't fear losing. If you are afraid to lose, then you will never be good at anything. There is no certainty you will win. Get over it. This uncertainty of outcome should fire you up and fuel your performance, not poison your performance by causing you to choke or panic. There is a 'thrill' involved in going into a match verses a great opponent...one that either has or is capable of beating you. Those that have a 'thrill-seeking' mentality are ALWAYS the best athletes. Others are grouped as 'practice room wrestlers'. The uncertainty about competition is what draws all these great athletes that you read about who come out of retirement. The very reason some of you reading this choke in competition is the very reason so many others CAN'T STAND being away from the competition. It is how you DEAL with the pressures of competition that matters.

Do this: Instead of getting SCARED when you have a top kid to face off against, feel CHALLENGED. If I say: "I'm gonna see if I can beat this kid today" then I will be feeling excited about the match. If I say "Oh my God, I have to wrestle him!?!!" then I will step on the mat terrified and won't be able to win. Feel CHALLENGED about the match.

Don't fear winning. Yes, that is what I said. I believe I have had kids that are afraid of winning. They are afraid of being the man! Being on top is scary I guess and we are taught that once you get on top, it is harder since everyone is gunning for you. That simply is wrong and I don't know where this mentality came from. Once you are on top, most of them (95%) will lay down. They get psyched out and choke when they face you...just as some of you reading this have done in the past. I say that once you get on top, it is EASIER to stay there. Sure, there is the remaining 5% that will go harder against you but those kids go hard against everyone. Once you get on top, many kids will fear you and their parents and coaches won't expect them to beat you. There is this mentality that it is okay to lose to certain kids or certain teams. I believe that the kids on top win way too many matches because no one goes after them. THIS is why I think it is easier to stay on top than climb to the top. The kids that go after you are the one's that will go after everyone, the rest will hold back or just plain lay down. You should WANT to be the man. You should want to be the kid that everyone wants to watch but nobody wants to wrestle. There is nothing wrong with wanting it all.

Example of this: At OSU, I was involved with that program for 6 years and we won the Division I NCAA title 3 times! Well, as we were handed out our singlets and gear each year we were told in no uncertain terms that 'We were expected to win first, expected to be All-Americans and expected by our fans, team-mates, and the rest of the nation to be FIRST" Also, we were told that our Orange & Black singlets were worth 2 points a match. Those 2 points came from our competition being scared and intimidated. Every match began 2-0 in our favor. I found this to be true.

What is mental toughness?

This is easy. Mental toughness is like being a robot...not thinking. This is a common theme in my room. Thinking will get you beat. If my coach says we have 20 more sprints, the tough ones will step on the line while the weak ones will whine or make faces and act like a crybaby...they will go into thinking mode and feel sorry for themselves. The tough ones will remain 'detached' from the pain and step on the line. The Soviet coaches of the former Soviet athletic empire did not allow their athletes to show ANY emotion.

Mental toughness is also about being stubborn. You will score more points each match by being stubborn than with moves. Moves are a relatively small part of wrestling. Being tough and absolutely stubborn is what scores 90% of all points in the sport of wrestling. This is the bottom line and if you don't take this advice as absolute fact, then you will not reach your goals in wrestling. I am right about this.

Winning is a habit. Unfortunately, so is losing. It is not OK to lose to certain kids over and over again. If you get beat by the same kid in practice each day and begin to accept it, then before you know it an entire year will go by and you will still be getting your face rubbed in the mat by the same kid. People that win make a decision to win. Success is no accident.

Story time:

When I was a young kid, we would travel to meets and it seemed like many of the parents we traveled with had this mentality that it was OK to lose to Oklahoma kids. If their son got 3rd, then mom was happy and dad was proud...as long as it was an Oklahoma kid that won 1st. There was a 'safety-net' mentality here. My dad was furious with this and it was NOT OK for us to lose to Oklahoma kids. We beat a lot of them and also lost to some as well...but went after all kids...regardless of what wrestling state they were from. Sometimes it is the parents' fault that their son doesn't reach his potential. Think about it.

If your coach or parents don't have high expectations for you...then do it yourself. Shannon Miller (Olympic Champion gymnast) once said: "No one ever had high expectations of me, but that was okay because I had high expectations of myself!" There you go.

Story time:

An Olympian once told my Sudden Victory Wrestling Camp kids that the reason he is such of a consistent performer is because he finds a way to feed off of the negative things he encounters in competition. In sports psychology, this is called reframing. You RE-FRAME your negative reactions into positive ones. For example, before he wrestled for the spot on Olympic team, he began feeling nervous and thinking negative thoughts. He did not want to be the Olympic team alternate AGAIN, he had not beaten this opponent in the last 2 years and had just lost their first bout of the evening. Things were not looking good. Then he began to think about the match that was about to happen. He started thinking of the elevated mat that was up on a 5-foot platform and how cool it was to run up those stairs to square off in front of the sold out crowd. He thought about how his opponent would be all angry and muscled up and try to rip his head off and how he was going to try to rip this man's head off too. He thought about all the fans and TV cameras there and how the entire wrestling world was waiting to hear of the outcome of their matches so they'd know who was on the US team.

*Notice, he did not think or worry about winning (remember, only think about what you have TOTAL control over) but instead thought about the FUN part of wrestling. Within 2 minutes, he went from being totally unmotivated and scared (choking) to being so fired up he could not wait for the match. This is the most vital piece of advice anyone can give you. THIS STORY EXEMPLIFIES PERFORMANCE AND GETTING READY. Use this story and the advice in this story and you will know what it takes to get ready. You will also look forward to competition instead of fearing it. This is what you do when your coach says to 'get mentally ready for this match'.

*Coaches: Define exactly what you mean when you tell your kids to 'get ready' and use this story as an example. They need to think about the match and the battle that will ensue.

ps This is also how you get motivated to practice. Think about the drilling and how great a technician you are going to be. Think about getting big and broad and you will begin to get motivated to lift the

weights. Don't think about the work or how tired you are going to be...think about the pay off. Many people think about the work and the downside...so they stay in the couch. Motivating yourself is a necessary skill. If you don't have this skill, you will never be any good at anything.

If you feel like you are going to choke, do what is mentioned above. Reframe your thoughts. People always give athletes the advice of "Just don't think about it". Well, that is impossible! Our brains run 24 hours a day and you can't stop thinking. But, you can take control over WHAT you think about. Replace your thoughts with thoughts that make you feel like wrestling. Replacing your thoughts is another skill you must have. These are all essential skills to performing, getting mentally ready for a match or getting motivated to train.

Winning close ones:

As for wining close matches versus great opponents, you must realize that many matches can go either way. Winning your first State or National title or medal will require you to win close matches. Just as you cannot be afraid to lose, you cannot be afraid to have close matches.

How do you win close matches? Several keys come to mind:

1. Don't make mistakes. Most big matches are lost, not won. Mistake-free wrestling equals winning wrestling. Wrestle smart.
2. Have a game plan (read below)
3. Focus on our one-point-at-a-time wrestling philosophy. Remember, the only way to beat a great opponent (or anyone else for that matter) is one point at a time.
4. You MUST get your escape point. If you can't get up, you will end up with a lot of bronze medals.
5. Get the first takedown and 2nd period escape point. I know that this sounds easier said than done but if you focus ALL your efforts on getting the first takedown, you'll generally get it. This is the bottom line. Plus, it gives you a starting point for winning the match. As for the 2nd period, if you pick bottom and get away, you are now winning the match 3-0 or 3-1 (if he got away at the end of the first). Going into the 3rd with a lead like this puts you in the drivers seat and if you stay tough and smart, it is almost mathematically impossible for you to lose.

* Don't defer your chance to score now!

SELDOMLY DO WE DEFER...only if the kid is tremendous on top will we defer. Otherwise, we pick bottom in the second. Good news is that our opponent's will always defer to us so chances are, we get to go on bottom about 100% of the time in the 2nd period.

EX: I get the takedown and he escapes. End of 1st period is 2-1. Second period I defer and he goes down...gets escape point. End of 2nd period is 2-2. I am on bottom and there is pressure on both wrestlers. However, if I took bottom in the 2nd and get away, I am now going into the 3rd period with a 3-1 lead. Sure, he is on bottom but ALL the pressure is on him. If I am a leg-rider on top, I am in the drivers

seat. This is the GAMEPLAN FOR WINNING BIG MATCHES that Purler Wrestling Academy enforces. It works. Don't defer.

6. If you find yourself down in the 3rd and needing to make a comeback, feel challenged...not scared. If you feel scared and panic because you are losing, then you will never be any good. If you feel challenged and step up, you will be State and National Champion. You will have to come from behind to win big tournaments. I guarantee it. Plan for it NOW so that when it does happen, you will react appropriately.

Game plans:

The bottom line is that we attack the problem. For example, if I am nervous about my opponent's quickness, my game plan will be to tie him up and stay in a low stance while he is outside since I know quick kids can score from the outside position. I may decide to work from a head tie or under hook position this match. A key to controlling your nerves and self-doubt is to attack the problems that have you concerned. Don't ignore your concerns; these are red flags that will lead you to success. Develop a game plan and DEAL with your concerns about your opponent. This is a vital part of pre-match preparation. If you don't know your opponent, then simply size him up. Develop a game plan based on what he looks like. For example, a real tall kid may be a leg rider or cradle man...many are. Or, you may like to hit low singles on short, stocky kids. Seeing this type of kid may give you the idea to try to score from outside at first. Again, it is only a starting point and sometimes you can't develop much of a game plan since you have never seen the kid wrestle before or have never gone against him. So you do what you can do and 'size him up' and try to develop a strategy or 'plan-of-attack' based on what his body type is.

Body language is important. We all can tell when someone is sad because they have a sad look on their face and have sad body language. They look at the ground, slump in their chair, etc. Well, it is scientifically proven that the reverse is also true. No matter how you feel inside, if you put a confident look on your face, hold your head up, maintain a calm and confident expression and keep your chest out, your body chemistry will actually change and reflect that of a confident person. This is fact and common knowledge to highly successful athletes. How else do you think actors make themselves cry? Steve Frasier wrote an article on this years ago that really opened my eyes. It was call something like "The best athletes are often the best actors" and was a good article. Confidence is a learned behavior...you are not born that way...at least most of us are not. Practice being calm and confident and everyday life such as while at school, etc. I know many of your Freshman enter high school and it can be very intimidating. This is a good time to put on a confident body language and learn to look confident. Don't act like a whipping boy...that is the bottom line. "Even if you are not confident, act like you are. No one can tell the difference."

Focus on what you CAN do. It is said that successful people spend 90% of their time focusing on the solution and only 10% of their time focusing on the problem. Unsuccessful people spend 90% of their time focusing on the problem and only 10% of their time focusing on the solution. Pick the ONE thing you need to do in order to improve and

give yourself 2 weeks to correct that. That alone can put you from being a State qualifier to a State Champion or a non-qualifier to a place-winner.

Keep some perspective. Remember, we are in one of the only countries where kids and adults can even pursue sports, hobbies, or interests. In just about every other country, they are dodging bullets or waiting in bread lines. As important as it may seem to you now, wrestling is a game. I know it is important to you but you have to maintain some perspective.