



FITNESS HOMEWORK: Performance Mode

Three Steps for Getting Your Athletes Into Performance Mode

How do you handle instructions to athletes before major competitions? Do you avoid talking about the competition in the days leading up to it as a way to reduce nervousness? Do you then deluge your athletes with everything they need to remember just before they hit the field?

In fact, a more effective method is a three-step approach in which you minimize your instructions on the day of competition.

This information comes from sport psychologist, Sean McCann, who after assisting athletes in eight Olympics for the USOC, has observed several factors that consistently result in successful performances.

The Three Main Factors for Success

In fact, athletes don't have to be "In the Zone" in order to perform well. What they do require is the following:

1. A focused, uncluttered mind, and thoughts that are entirely in the present, not the past or future.
2. Complete certainty on what needs to be done.
3. Complete confidence and trust that doing it will result in success.

McCann calls this state the "Execution Mode." (My preferred term is "Performance Mode"). But how do you help your athletes to reach this state?

Steps for Reaching the Performance Mode

There are three steps your athletes can move through to reach performance mode, starting in the day(s) before the competition.

The steps should be performed in sequence! As they move through these steps, their mindset will change, becoming more focused and attending to less information.

As this occurs, they will move from a left-brain analytical mind-set to an uncluttered, right-brain action-oriented state of mind in which they totally believe their actions will lead to success.

1. Arrival at Competition Venue - Familiarization, Concerns & Technique

Step One occurs when you first arrive at the competition venue (often the day before).

Help your athletes become familiar with the site so they can make a mental map of the environment and know all the important information they may need: location of locker rooms, training room, concessions and bathrooms; directions to the venue from the hotel, etc. At this point, make sure that their equipment is ready. You'll discuss

logistics for the competition day: when you'll be leaving, where to meet the bus, etc.

In the case of sports like cross-country running, go over landmarks, kilometer markers, hills, and locations where surges and moves can be made.

If you have the chance to do a run-through or warmup, this is the time to provide positive feedback or corrections to technique. In sports like basketball, you might want to take some foul shots, run important plays, etc.

This is also the time to address any concerns, doubts or distractions that your athletes may have.



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If you can't get to the venue, the day before the competition is still the time to address these issues. The bus drive down can be a good time to go over these points.

2. Identifying Specific Performance Keys

Step Two is also performed before the day of the competition: perhaps soon after your athletes have completed the familiarization step. In Step Two, you're narrowing your athlete's thinking from general issues such as logistics, general strategies and technique towards more specific tactics. The purpose of this step is to come up with two or three of the most essential keys to a good performance at the competition. This may involve a discussion between you and your athlete, or it may be a matter of you giving the athlete these keys.

Regardless, the athlete must be 100% convinced that the tactics you've decided upon are the best chance for success – that may mean taking some risks and abandoning tactics with which they feel most comfortable.

You can test the effectiveness of this phase by asking your athletes, "What are the two or three things you need to do to perform well?" If they answer that easily, your job in step two is completed.

This step may also be completed on the bus a day before the competition, but it should take place after Step One.

3. Performance Mode

Your athletes should move into Performance Mode the day of the competition. At this point, the work done in Steps One and Two will allow them to simplify their thoughts, reduce worry, and compete with focus and confidence in a right-brain mode. Right brain thinking allows the greatest amount of "flow" in athletic performance, while left-brain, analytical thinking often leads to "paralysis by analysis."

When interacting with your athletes, the coach concentrates only on the key points. Your discussion may consist of little more than a point-form mention of these cues.

One of the most effective things you can do to improve your athletes' mental performance is to explain the concept of "Execution Mode," and the steps that they should take to get to that point. Be sure to describe the type of uncluttered, focused thinking they should experience as the competition is about to begin.

You can name it as a goal to be met before the competition. You want your athlete to be moving toward this specific, clear, and well-defined way of thinking and behaving before the buzzer sounds or the starting gun fires.

Summary

If you remember nothing else about this process, when at championship competitions, don't burden your athletes with a multitude of last-minute instructions. Such instructions are better imparted a day or two before. Such instructions tend to move your athletes towards left-brain analytical thinking versus the right-brain thinking that allows "flow" in athletic performance.

On the day of the competition, keep your athletes' thinking uncluttered, focusing on only two or three key performance points.

On the next page is a handout that outlines the key points in this article.



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These steps should be followed in sequence, with Step One and Two occurring before the competition day. The goal is to achieve an uncluttered, focused, confident mental state with the athlete in a right-brain mode for optimal “flow” in performance.

Step 1 - Familiarization, Concerns & Techniques

- Takes place upon arriving at the venue or during the bus trip.
- Become familiar with the competition site.
- Check equipment.
- Discuss logistics.
- Final feedback on technique.
- Discuss any concerns.

Step 2 - Identifying Specific Performance Keys

- Start to narrow focus towards specific tactics.
- Identify and agree upon two or three keys to success.
- Ask the question: What are the two or three things you need to perform well?

Step 3 - Performance Mode

- Focus only on the two or three keys to success.
- Keep the mind uncluttered to stay in right-brain thinking.
- Think only in the present, not the past or future.
- Make it a goal to achieve this state of thinking.