

RUGBY TOUGH



**Foreword by
Wayne Smith**

Bruce Hale / David Collins
EDITORS

foreword:

The Mindset of a Champion

Rugby is the ultimate team sport. All 15 players have to be focused on identical team goals: to play with an intensive, aggressive style; to communicate effectively; and to perform high-speed decisions and skills in synchrony. At the international level, every player must be strong, quick, highly skilled and well versed in knowledge of the game. In the All Blacks, all coaches and players must strive for the highest honors.

Preparation is the key to success at any level. Every player needs to have sufficient nutritional intake, adequate technical knowledge, well-rehearsed match strategies and highly trained physiological capacities—and that's not all. There is even something more necessary than knowledge and physical preparedness: mental preparation. At the international level, often the only difference between the players that earn the silver fern and those who fail is adequate mental preparation. Although this seems like an insurmountable challenge, even new players can learn to build this very mindset of a champion.

Mental preparation involves learning mental skills and strategies that can be used in matches to attain optimal individual performance and team success. These are skills that are learned on and off the pitch and are applied to competitive performance. Rugby players can learn these skills from coaches, players and sport psychologists, and they can learn from reading books and watching videos.

As with any skill, if you want to improve your match performance, you have to practice regularly. This book will help you learn those critical mental preparation skills, and it will show you how to use them in training and competition.

The All Blacks are no exception. The All Blacks are the jewel of the rugby world because they are more mentally tough than other national sides. They have consistently been the best team over the last few decades with players that are in outstanding physical condition and who receive superlative coaching to play at their highest capacity each week in the season.

So when players want to get a place on the roster of the All Blacks, they have to play and act like All Blacks. That means being prepared physically *and* mentally. I want teams that show a lot of character and are relentless. I expect players to be fluent in a range of skills, not just those associated with their positions. Our team needs to be multiskilled with their positions.

The playing skills I want in my players include the very mental skills stressed in this book. Players like Andrew Mehrtens spend hours visualizing and rehearsing perfect kicks and punts. Christian Cullen and Jeff Wilson have honed their decision-making skills for a match to quickly decide whether to run or kick on attack. Former captain Sean Fitzpatrick excelled in the skill of motivating his side to the right level of aggression and confidence. Back-row players such as Todd Blackadder and Taine Randle have trained their concentration focus to such a high level that they can anticipate offensive and defensive moves before they occur. All our coaches motivate individual players and the team by formulating and evaluating match and seasonal goals. Mental skills are such a critical part of each player's repertoire; they simply must be there if they want to excel at the highest level.

This book is written for every union and league player and for coaches who want to optimize their own and their team's performance on the pitch. It can fill a gap in current training by ensuring that players are both physically and mentally prepared. It will acquaint you with the essential mental skills that are necessary for success, and it will provide opportunities to practice these skills in training and competition. Mental training is important at all skill levels, and this text will help both elite and novice players consistently play better.

The book begins by exploring fundamental mental skills, then it moves to applying them in specific competitive situations. It focuses first on individual skills and then shows how they are used in team interactions. It is written by some of the most experienced rugby sport psychologists and qualified rugby coaches in the world. It will assist in identifying your strengths and weaknesses to allow you to individualize your training. Numerous examples of mental skill applications in training and competition are presented to help you improve your mental preparation and give you a game-winning edge.

Will it make you a champion? That is for you to decide. All rugby players have to train hard, eat well and play smart to succeed. In my experience, mentally prepared athletes are more likely to play well and perform at the elite level; subsequently, their teams usually succeed. Regular mental training is the simple difference between good athletes and great players. The information here can help every rugby player reach for greatness. Good luck!

Wayne Smith, head coach
New Zealand All Blacks, 2000-2001

contents

Foreword: The Mindset of a Champion
Wayne Smith

Acknowledgments

ix

xiii

Introduction: Psyching Up for Rugby

Bruce D. Hale and David J. Collins 1

PART I MENTALLY TOUGH PLAYERS

1 The Mental Profile

Angela Abbott and Bob Easson 17

2 Motivation and Confidence

Ken Hodge and Alex McKenzie 35

3 Visualizing the Perfect Match

Bruce D. Hale and Bruce Howe 61

4 Focusing On the Game

Jeff Summers, Steven Christensen
and Paul Sheath 87

5 Using Stress for a Competitive Advantage

Kirsten Barnes and Austin Swain 113

PART II MENTALLY TOUGH TEAMS

6 Cohesion and Teamwork

Krista Munroe, Peter Terry
and Albert Carron 137

7 The Attacking Mindset

Eddie O'Sullivan and P.J. Smyth 155

8 Tough Defense

Hugh Richards and Dean Richards 179

9 Mental Sharpness for Every Match

David J. Collins, Patrick Mortimer
and Bruce D. Hale 205

References 235

Index 237

Contributors 246

About the Editors 248

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index

Note: Tables are indicated by an italicized *i* following the page number; figures are indicated by an italicized *f*. Photos have italicized page numbers.

- A**
- achievable goals 50
 - activation levels, controlling 51
 - activation words 125
 - adjustable goals 41, 42-43
 - affirmations
 - for building self-confidence 56, 58
 - positive affirmations 125, 126*r*
 - aggression 185, 187-189
 - alertness, maintaining 89
 - Ali, Muhammad 56
 - Andrews, Rob 164-165
 - anniversary celebrations 107-110
 - anxiety
 - confidence eroded by 185
 - reduced by prematch routine 224
 - appraisal/reappraisal 120-124
 - arousal control 185, 186-187
 - Athlete Performance Profile sheet 139-141, 140*f*, 142*r*
 - attacking
 - off scrum 173-174
 - psychological attack 230-231
 - from starts and restarts 174-176
 - tactical kicking 176-177
 - through lineout 171-172
 - wide from lineout 173
 - attacking ability 183-184
 - attacking mindset
 - absence of fear 159
 - developing decision making 161-162
 - goal setting for 167-168
 - and ideal performance state 157-162
 - practicing for competence and confidence 162-166
 - attacking scrum options 219-220
 - attainment, criteria for *A* attention
 - dimensions of 89-92
 - divided attention 89, 90-91, 105
- B**
- Bac, Neil 196
 - back-to-back tries 232-233
 - Bacon, T.A. 221
 - ball watching 210
 - behaviorally coping 131-133
 - biofeedback systems 82
 - Blackadder, Todd 40, 41
 - black-and-white thinking 122
 - Bledisloe Cup 62-63
 - body language 132-133
 - body-scanning skills 104-105
 - Bompa, T.O. 221
 - Bowering, Kevin 146
 - breathing
 - focused breathing 128
 - imagery exercise 71
 - one-breath relaxation 129
 - British Student Championships 149-150
 - Brown, Lee 47
 - broad attention 90
 - broad-external focus 93, 94*f*
 - broad-internal focus 93, 94*f*
 - Browke, Zuhair 39, 54
 - Brown, Gordon 188
 - Brown, Vincent 172
 - Brunei University 149-150
 - Burke, Matt 90

- C**
 Campbell, Ollie 162, 166
 Campese, David 88-89, 160, 164
 captains, role of 170
 Carling, Will 152
 catastrophizing 121
 centering technique 129
 check scanning 207-208, 209, 211, 212, 213-214
 Christie, Kirch 109, 194
 clarity exercise 72
 clarity-witness exercises 73, 74
 coaches
 allowing players to experience success 49-50
 appropriate feedback from 30
 in assessment process 23-24
 checking players' understanding of roles 194
 choreographic coaching 219
 in communication process 119
 comparing correct and incorrect techniques 160
 concentration training 96, 99, 103
 disagreement with players on what is important 139
 elaborate playbooks 219
 feedback with positive explicit instruction 195
 game day role of 201
 game-specific strategies of 193-194
 honest dialogue with players 144
 leadership behavior in goal setting process 145
 maintaining air of confidence 52
 and motivation 195-196
 and player stress-coping process 121
 questioning style 196
 speed or distance changes in drills 200
 strategies and plans 192-196
 and verbal persuasion 50-51
 coherence 216-221, 217
 coming from behind 169-170
 commitment, understanding 7-8
 communication
 adapting throughout game 202
 changes from training to competition 202
 essential to defense 202
 on pitch 233
 redefining 119
 competency, practicing for 162-166
 competition
 evaluating 30-32
 mental preparation for 221-224
 mental training 222, 223
 concentration
 about 88-89
 attentional flexibility and style 92-95
 attentional focus 89-92
 case study, anxious and unfocused 100-103
 case study, moment in time 107-110
 case study, old ways and new ways 104-107
 effect of confidence on 48
 lapses in 88-89, 91, 96
 problems with 24-25, 97, 99-100, 158-159
 skills for improving attention 95-97
 concentration activities
 coping with distractions 102
 focus training 106-107
 organizing concentration task 103
 sensory expertise 105-106
 task refinement 105-106
 using plans and routines 101-102
 concentration cue words 125
 confidence. *See also* self-confidence
 contagion of 52
 improving with imagery 68, 126
 in mental set 185, 186
 portraying 52
 practicing for 162-166
 from prematch routine 224
 from within self 36
 Connolly, Gary 47
 control exercise 74-75
 controlling the controllables 133
 Cook, Geoff 164
 cooldown, physical and mental 228
 coping
 behaviorally 131-133
 mentally 125-126
 physically 126-130
 coping/imagery exercise 77-78
 Cribb, Ron 50
 crowd noise 90, 171, 229
 crucial situations 168-177
 cue identification 190
 cues, directing attentional focus 92
 cue words
 about 54-56
 attacking off warning 173-174
- attacking through lineup 171, 172
 concentration cue words 125
 converting actions to 185-186
 in crucial situations 169
 focus on process goals 168
 and prematch routine 56
 Cullen, Christian 47
- D**
 Dallaglio, Lawrence 20
 Dalzell, Kevin 5
 Davies, Jonathan 91
 decision making
 developing 161-162
 DWeb drills 210
 effect of confidence on 48
 imagery exercises for 80-81
 scanning skills 206-212, 213-214
 tactical decision making 190-192
 team dimension 216
 Decision Web. *See* DWeb
 defense
 communication essential to 202
 components of 180f
 defender's body position 219
 explaining overall picture 193
 feedback 195
 importance of 181-184
 motivation 195-196
 assessing opponents' strengths 232
 roles and responsibilities 194-195
 skill development 195
 Delgado, Alex 107-110
 Deylaud, Christophe 97
 distractions
 causes vs. symptoms 96
 coping with 102
 crowd noise as 90
 refocusing attention after 92
 for thrower 171
 D'Silva, Alex 108, 109
 divided attention 89, 90-91, 105
 duration and speed control exercise 76
 DWeb
 about 206-213
 case study 213-216
 preliminary scanning in possession drill 209f
 retreat scan practice 215f
 Saloon Doors drill for check scanning 212f
 Saloon Doors drill for pre-mauling 211f
- Saloon Doors drill for pre-scanning and check scanning 213f
 scanning cycle in team invasion games 207f
 Dwyer, Bob 160, 170
- E**
 Eales, John 36, 62-63, 83, 84, 85f, 86
 elite players, qualities of 21
 emotions/positive outcome exercise 76-77
 environment
 preparing for 228-230
 for training 200
 Evans, Ieuan 88
 excellence
 facilitating player development of 29-32
 in training 26-29
 exercises. *See* Imagery exercises
 external imagery 68-69
 external stress factors 117f
- F**
 failure, fear of 159-160
 familiarization with venue 72, 118-119, 228-230
 feedback
 appropriateness of 30
 assessing personal qualities 23
 DWeb drills 210
 individual video footage 30
 linked to specific behaviors 195, 196
 performance feedback 82
 with positive explicit instruction 195
 providing when appropriate 30
 sandwich method 228
 with video footage 215
 focus
 attentional styles 93, 94f, 95
 inappropriate focus 156-157
 on negative 122, 159
 on task 48, 55, 65
 focused attention, 90
 focused breathing 128
 focus training 106-107
 Fox, Grant 53, 55
 future, predicting 122
- G**
 game-plan exercise 147, 148f, 149-150
 goal achievement worksheet 44, 45f
 goal kicking, focus training 106-107

- goals
 clarity of 119
 commitment to 28
 defined 39
 establishment of 30-32
 group goal setting 144-145
 monitoring progress toward 46
 performance goals *vs.* outcome goals 40-41
 positive *vs.* negative 40
 process goals 167, 168, 171
 sample goal staircase 387
 strategies for achieving 41, 44
 tracking and evaluation 44-46
 types of 37
 visual reminders of 46
 goal setting
 for learning mindset 167-168
 group goal setting 144-145
 as motivation starting point 37
 and self-confidence 48
 with self-motivation 39-40
 with SMARTS 41-44
 team goal setting 142; 143-146, 145f
 goal staircase sample 387
 Gregan, George 36, 47
- H**
 Haka dance, New Zealand All Blacks 132, 133
 Hale, B.D. 70
 Hanley, Eillery 5
 Hastings, Gavin 21, 22f, 28
 head-on tackle 187
 height, trying to predict into adulthood 19
 high-quality practice 27-28
 high trait-anxious players 116
 Hill, Richard 150
 Hodges, Duncan 27
 homework, skill learning 9
 Horan, Tim 164
 hostile behavior, avoiding 188
- I**
 ideal performance state 54, 157-162
 ideal players, qualities of 21
 illegally high tackle 188
 imagery
 about 63-64
 during competition 67
 confidence improvement with 68, 126
 controlling activation levels 51
 coping with nerves 126
 critical moments for using 66f
 Eales penalty kick example 62-63, 83-86, 85f
 as extension of modelling 51-52
 of ideal plays within game 27-28
 image content control 74
 kinesthetic imagery 73, 75, 78, 82
 in match routine 227
 mental rehearsal 26-27
 motivation improvement with 65
 practice and match routines 81
 principles of 68
 sensory expertise activities 105-106
 simulating game conditions 165-166
 strategy rehearsal with 67
 stress management with 65
 types of 68-70
 uses of 64-65
 with visual aids 82-83
 visualizing error-making situation 161
 when to use 65-68
 imagery exercises
 about 70
 breathing exercise 71
 clarity exercise 72
 clarity-vividness exercises 73, 74
 control exercise 74-75
 coping imagery exercise 77-78
 decision-making exercise 80-81
 positive outcome/emotions exercise 76-77
 practice schedule exercise 78
 speed and duration control exercise 76
 vividness exercise 73
 imagery practice schedule exercise 80
 imagery rehearsal schedule 79f
 imagery scripts 83-86
Imagery Training (Hale) 70
 individual performance. *See also* performance
 about 184
 anticipation 189-190
 mental set 185-189
 practical applications 184
 tactical decision making 190-192
 individual roles, clarification in different phases of play 29
 information overload 103, 190
 injury, psychological effects of 104-105
Inside the All Blacks (McConnell) 162, 196
- intentional thinking 54
 internal attentional focus 91
 internal imagery 69-70
 internal stress factors 117f
 interpersonal skills 11-12
 intrapersonal skills 112
 irrational thinking, challenging 122
- J**
 Jenkins, Neil 5, 26-27, 67
 Jones, Michael 27-28
 journaling
 recording game details 118
 training log 46, 120
- K**
 kick-and-cover strategy 232
 kicking tactics 176-177
 kickoffs 174-176
 kinesthetic awareness 106
 kinesthetic imagery 73, 75, 78, 82
 Kirk, David 43, 46
 Kronfeld, Josh 44
- L**
 Larkham, Stephen 5, 47
 learning, components of 6
 Leatham, Donal 88
 Le Roux, Hennie 97
 life skills 11-14
 lineout
 attacking through 171-172
 attacking wide from 173
 Lomu, Jonah 100, 101, 192-194
 long-term goals 37, 40
 long-term learning 199
 Lough, Michael 5, 170
- M**
 McConnell, Robin 162-163, 188
 McCrechan, Ian 5
 McQueen, Rod 36
 Magnoé, Olivier 47
 Malins, Laurie 162-163
 man and ball 212
 Masolela, Nelson 109
 Martin, Greg 88-89
 match, imagery routines, 81
 match performance evaluation 28-29
 match routine 226f, 227-228
 measurable goals 41, 42, 50
 Mehrtens, Andrew 36
- mentally coping 125-126
 mental practice 64. *See also* imagery
 mental preparation 221-224
 for competition 221-224
 DWB case study 213-216
 team-specific problem solving 216-221
 in training 206-221
 mental rehearsal 26-27, 190-191
 mental set 185-189
 mental skills. *See also* attacking mindset
 examples 4-5
 improving with imagery 65
 as life skills 11-14
 practice in nonpressure situations 136
 practice of 6, 78
 profiling for rugby 24-25
 psychophysical training 2-3
 seven steps of success 5-10
 systematic training program 221-224
 training critical to defense 203
 mind reading 122
 mistakes, fear of 159-161
 Mitchell, John 5, 36
 modelling 50, 51-52. *See also* vicarious experiences
 models, choosing 8-9
 Moore, Brian 152
 motivation
 effect of confidence on 48
 goal setting as starting point 37
 improving with imagery 65
 from within self 36
 wanting to and having to 36-37
 movement, to relieve tension 130
 movement feelings, remembering 64
 Muhammad Ali 56
 muscle relaxation, progressive 129-130
 mutual respect exercise 150-152
- N**
 narrow-external focus 93, 94f
 narrow-internal focus 93, 94f, 95
 negative, focusing on 122, 159
 negative thoughts
 dealing with 56-57
 replacing with positive thoughts 102, 129f
 nervousness 51. *See also* activation levels, controlling; stress
 New Zealand All Blacks, linka dance 132, 133

- Nideffer, R. 93, 94f
 99 call 188
 nutrition, before match 225
- O**
 offensive attack, practice sequence 163
 Oflah, Martin 47
 off-season training
 fitness training 53
 mental training 222f, 223-224
 O'Gara, Ronan 161
 one-breath relaxation 129
 opponents
 disrupting 173
 game-specific strategies against 139-194
 information about 189-190
 making life uncomfortable for 187
 preparing for 229, 230-233
 psychological domination of 232-233
 strengths and weaknesses of 147, 148f, 149-150, 230-232
 taking advantage of errors 158-159
 O'Sullivan, Eddie 163
 outcome, distinguishing from process 31
 outcome goals 40-41
 overgeneralizing 121
- P**
 paralysis by analysis 91
 part-whole method of practice 9
 Patterson, Chris 27
 peak performance 3-4
 perception, selectivity of 89-90
 performance. *See also* individual performance
 choosing models 8-9
 and prematch mindset 149
 strategies for monitoring 139
 under stress 198-200
 and talent identification 18
 team performance 201-203
 performance accomplishments 49-50
 performance feedback 82
 performance goals 41
 performance profiling 4, 21-24
 personal affirmation statements 58
 personal qualities, assessing 23
 personal time 131-132
 physical contact, intensity of 186
 physical goals 37
 physically coping 126f-130
- reappraisal/appraisal 120-124
 receiving restarts 175-176
 referee, expectations from 230
 regularity imagery exercises 78, 80-81
 reinforcement imagery exercises 81-83
 reinforcement of behaviors 196
 relabelling 51
 relaxation imagery exercises 70-71
 respect, mutual 150-152
 restarts, attacking from 174-176
 retreat scan practice 215f
 risk taking 25, 150-160
 role ambiguity 119
 of captains 170
 of coaches on game day 201
 in defense 194-195
 explicit statement of 200-201
 player confidence in 162-163
 team understanding and accepting 146-147, 149-150
 rolling maal 232
 Royce, Jon 206
 rugby
 attentional skills required 95
 behaviors specific to excellence 26
 bonding effect of 138, 151
 changes to laws of 181
 dynamic environment of 164
 intensity of physical contact 186
 as interdependent sport 150
 responsibilities of professional athletes 119
 Rugby World Cup
 average points conceded per game 182f
 average points scored per game 183f
 importance of defense 195-196
 statistics 181-184
 team results 182f
- S**
 Saloon doors drill 210, 211f, 212f, 213f
 scanning 206-212, 213-214
 scanning in possession 208
 scrum, attacking off 173-174
 selective attention 90, 101
 self-assessment 20-24
 self-confidence. *See also* confidence about 47-49
 affirmations for building 56
 problems with 24
 self-talk integral to 53, 54
- variable practice 164, 198-199
 videotaping 82
 practice structure 198-199
 precompetition mental training 222f, 223
 pre-sick routine, Jenkins 67
 prematch mindset 149
 prematch preparation 225, 226f
 prematch routine
 about 224-225
 confidence from 53
 and cue words 55, 226f, 227
 on day of match 225, 226f, 227
 dealing with potential stress 117
 focus on skill steps 118
 with imagery 66, 78
 for individuals 28, 225-228, 226f
 sample stress coping routines 118f
 honest dialogue with coaches 144
 learning styles of 163
 performance of roles 194-195
 role responsibility acceptance 194
 sample player profile 22f
 Plessis, Morne du 109
 positional prematch routine 118f
 position requirements, applying skills to 11
- positive, discounting 122
 positive affirmations 125, 126f
 positive attitude, maintaining 52-53
 positive outcome/emotions exercise 76-77
 positive self-talk 123
 positive thoughts
 impact of 122
 replacing negative thoughts with 102, 123f
 postmatch evaluation 28-29, 119
 prematch routine 226f, 228
 potential, playing to 3-4
 practice
 coming from behind 170
 for competency and confidence 162-166
 under gamelike conditions 163, 164-166, 200
 high-quality practice 27-28
 and imagery 68, 81
 with intentional errors 160
 at match intensity 201
 of mental skills 6, 78
 outside team sessions 27
 part-whole method of practice 9
- process goals 41, 167-168, 171
 professional athletes, responsibilities of 119
 profiling
 mental skills for rugby 24-25
 performance profiling 4, 21-24
 of rugby skills 20-24
 team performance profiling 138-143, 145
 progressive muscle relaxation 129-130
 proprioceptive cues 105
 psychological attack 230-231
 psychological goals 37
 psychological skills
 identifying 19-20
 profiling 22f
 thought-based activities 104
 psychological training 2-3
- Q**
 qualities, rating importance of 21
- R**
Rainbow Warrior, The (Pennaar) 108
 rapid skill acquisition 199
 realistic imagery exercises 72-78
 realistic goals 41, 43, 50

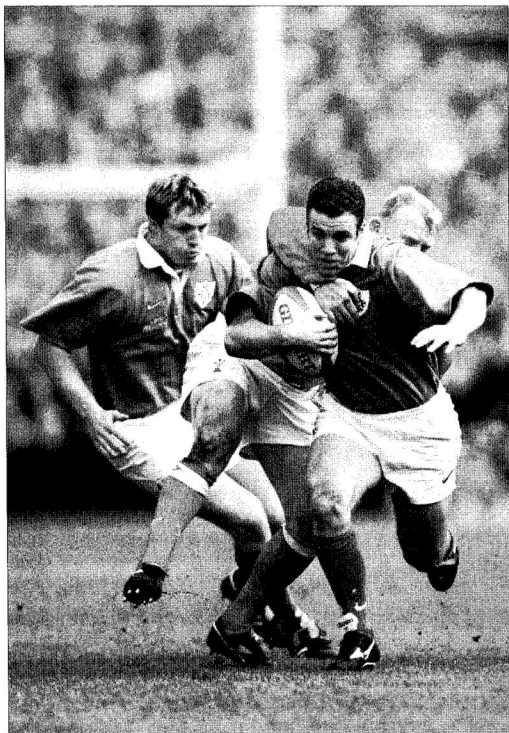
- specific goals 41, 42, 50
 speed and duration control exercise 76
 sport psychology books, concentration activities 99, 111
 sport vision 206-213
 Springbooks 97, 108-109
 staff, in communication process 119
 starts, attacking from 174-176
 Stransky, Joel 97
 strategies
 rehearsing with imagery 67
 team discussion of 147, 149-150
 strengths and weaknesses
 evaluating 10, 20
 identifying with goal setting 40
 of opponents 147, 148, 149-150, 230-232
 of team 25, 138-139
 stress
 about 114-116
 behavioral symptoms of 124
 level 1 coping 124-133
 level 2 appraisal 120-124
 level 3 interventions 116-120
 managing with imagery 65
 mental effects of 124
 performance under 199-200
 physical symptoms of 124
 sources of 117
 stress and coping model 115f
 stress intervention model 127f
 success
 allowing players to experience 49-50
 relationship with self-confidence 47
 SUCCESS acronym 77
 Successful Coach, *The* (McConnell) 162
 Swansea University 149-150
 synergy effect 146
T
 tackle, illegally high 188
 tactical decision making 190-192
 tactical goals 37
 taking things personally 122
 talent identification 18-19, 20, 25
 Talent Search Program, Australia 19
 tape. See audiotape; videotape
 task, focus on 48, 55, 65
 task cohesion 139
 task-relevant thoughts 185-186
 team
 attacking across opponents 219-220
 coherence 216-221
 communication skills 119
 game-plan exercise 147, 148f, 149-150
 goal setting 142, 143-146, 145f
 organization of training 197-198
 prematch mental preparation
 promoting mutual respect 150-152
 shared mental model 216-221
 138-139
 team-specific problem solving 216-221
 team cohesion 138
 team performance 201-203
 Team Performance Profile sheet 139-141, 141f, 142f
 team performance profiling 138-143, 145
 technical goals 37
 technical knowledge, profiling 22f
 tempo, controlling 232
 thought stopping 56-57, 102
 threats vs. opportunities 121-122
 thrower
 distractions for 171
 mental practice 172
 time-referenced goals 41, 44
 training
 about 196-197
 in concentration 96, 99, 103
 evaluating 30-32
 excellence in 26-29
 under game-like conditions 31, 163, 164-166, 200
 mental preparation 206-221
 off-season fitness training 53
 organization of 197-198
 practical applications 197
 practice structure 198-199
 psychological training 2-3
 with simulation 199-201
 with sudden halts 192
 year-round mental training plan 221
 training log 46, 120
 training needs, applying skills to 11
 training sessions, publishing to advance 205-30
 trail-suitons players 116
 trials
 back-to-back 232-233
 point value of 181
 trist retirement 105, 106
 two-versus-one drill 218-219
U
 Underwood, Roy 187
 U21 Scottish Rugby Union team 29-30
V
 variable practice 164, 198-199
 venue
 familiarization with 118-119
 preparing for 228-230
 videotaping before game 72
 verbal persuasion 50-51
 vicarious experiences 50
 videotape
 for explaining overall strategy 193
 for feedback 215
 of game location before game 72
 individual player footage 30
 information about opponents 189
 from internal perspective 82-83
 of practice sessions 82
 reinforcing imagery exercises 81-82
 reliving concentration mode 96
 for review sessions 196
 sensory expertise activities 105-106
 studying World Cup play 101
 tactical decision training 191
 virtual reality imaging 82
 visual aids, for imagery 82-83
 visualization 25, 69. See also imagery
 videx exercise 73
W
 Wallace, David 174
 Wallace, Richard 158, 165-166
 Ward, Tony 166
 warm-up
 about 227
 to relieve tension 130
 weaknesses. See strengths and weaknesses
 weather, anticipating 220
 weighted rugby ball 82
 what-ifs
 dealing with 117
 scenarios 150
 World Cup. See Rugby World Cup
Y
 your round mental training plan 221

introduction

Psyching Up for Rugby

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What percentage of successful rugby performance is determined by mental preparation for each match? Fifty percent? Twenty percent? Or even one percent? Often your ability to be psyched up, relaxed, positive or focused determines the degree of individual success you experience in any given training session or contest.

Yet many players and coaches still believe there's little they can do to improve the ups and downs of playing performance. Simply put, they're wrong. Every player from youth rugby to national side selection can learn simple psychological skills to improve consistency on the pitch.

In fact, recent research among elite Olympic and professional athletes has revealed that the use of certain mental skills and stance have repeatedly been associated with superior performance for the athletes who possess them. These psychological skills and states include goal setting, higher self-confidence, anxiety management, heightened concentration and use of visualization and imagery. These athletes also report having well-developed coping skills for dealing with unforeseen events, regular competitive routines and plans, mental preparation and high levels of motivation and commitment. The best athletes in the world simply can't be wrong. If you want to be the best, you have to train for all aspects of competition.

The State of the Union in Mental Training

Rugby requires expertise in a variety of playing skills. Unlike American football, where players tend to specialize in one or two off-repeated skills, skillful rugby demands players who can run, pass, tackle and think at every position. It is a free-flowing game where teams of 7, 13 or 15 players have to be able to effectively execute differing techniques at high speed and adjust their play to the event that occurred five seconds earlier! It has now become a thinking player's game that can't always be scripted before a match or practiced exactly as expected. To be successful in rugby, players must be both physically and mentally fit.

In the past, few players were taught mental preparation skills for training and competition. Today, though, professionals practice mental techniques that involve the intricacies of

how to make a particular pass or kick. They study and learn the mechanics of a particular break off a scrum; they know more about nutrition for high performance; and they develop warm-up routines and fitness exercises that enable them to excel. It's no longer a case of learn a skill and repeat it. Now it's a case of developing the mental abilities to grow as an athlete. Some elite players have even developed their own brand of useful mental strategies, personally designed for their own psyches. Yet despite this progressive movement towards mental preparation, the majority of today's players have not had systematic training and opportunities to use mental skills to maximize their performance.

Athletes cannot even find this needed knowledge in athletic literature. Most how-to rugby texts deal only with the physical side of the game. They neglect the mental skills that are necessary for success in training and matches. What they fail to communicate, as with many athletic books in general, is that good players must *mentally* prepare for matches, just as they physically and tactically prepare. This book, however, presents both individual and team mental skills that can enable you and your team to achieve maximum playing potential—regardless of the level of ability.

This type of psychological training in rugby is a relatively new area of scientific study for most coaches and athletes. At the elite level, a select few national teams now employ sport psychologists. They work regularly with coaches and athletes to establish year-round mental training programs that seek to enhance the performance of individual players and the team.

But not everyone needs a PhD to be proficient in sport psychology skills. Players and coaches alike can easily adopt these recent training interventions at the grassroots level and incorporate them into daily training and competition strategies. All you need to be is interested enough to read about them, then regularly practice them. As with any other rugby skill, perfect practice leads to perfect performance!

The Nature of Peak Performance in Rugby

All rugby players aspire to play to their potential. But what exactly does that mean? Your potential can be thought of as the following: You execute every game skill to the best of your ability;

you have the fitness and stamina to play energetically and aggressively for 80 minutes; you are mentally skilled to make wise tactical decisions during a match; and you cope with various physical and mental challenges that occur while playing.

After identifying what it means to play to your potential, the next question to ask is, how exactly do you assess your current playing ability? One way to logically assess your physical and mental skills is to use performance profiling, which identifies your strengths and weaknesses as compared with the best players at your position (see chapter 1). After such a diagnosis, you can design training programs that enable you to improve your skills and compete more closely to your actual playing potential.

The best players in the world strive to achieve such a peak performance in international matches. They desire to attain a performance zone in which they are totally absorbed in the match, operating as if they are on automatic pilot and performing flawlessly because they have prepared for every conceivable event during the match. This peak performance zone involves focusing for 80 minutes on rugby tactics, losing self-consciousness to merge into an important cog of the team and having a real sense of control over the outcome of the match. It is an effortless moment where players anticipate opponent's moves and automatically select and execute the proper countermove.

Mental Skills and Qualities Necessary for Elite Rugby Performance

To play at their best, successful rugby players must be physically, technically, tactically, nutritionally and (most important) mentally prepared. You, too, must possess certain mental qualities to get into this zone. These qualities include mental qualities to optimal arousal levels, a high motivation to excel, an appropriate attentional focus, a high confidence level and an overall positive feeling about performance. In addition, you need to rehearse competitive (and precompetitive) plans to develop positive team interactions. The best players in the world reach their potential by incorporating psychological training into their daily workouts and prematch preparation.

World-class players and coaches have developed repertoires and routines of mental skills that they use daily to reach their rugby goals. Backline players, such as Stephen Larkham of Australia, may verbalize positive self-statements to themselves before making a strong tackle or an offensive break to enhance their self-confidence (see chapter 2). Elite kickers, such as Neil Jenkins of Wales, visualize every successful penalty kick they take at goal to rehearse critical components (see chapter 3). Superior league players, such as Ellery Hanley of England, learned to read defensive cues for tackling coverage by using concentration cues to speed up their decision making and movements (see chapter 4). Scrumhalves, such as Kevin Dalzell of the United States, or hookers, such as Keith Wood of Ireland, may often take a deep breath before putting the ball into the scrum or throwing it into a lineup—all to ensure that their muscles are relaxed and their actions fluid (see chapter 5). Committed coaches, such as Ian McGeechan of Scotland and John Mitchell of the New Zealand All Blacks, and great players such as Michael Lynagh of Australia and Saracens, set out long-term and short-term goals during the preseason to maximize daily effort and maintain motivation over the long season (see chapters 2 and 6).

This text will help you add these powerful routines and team strategies to your playing skills so that you, too, can move your game to a higher level of achievement (see chapters 7 through 9). This book discusses these fundamental mental skills that are necessary to make you a complete player and a better team.

Seven Steps of Success for Skill Learning in Motor and Mental Skills

Mental skills are similar to rugby skills in that they must be logically learned, systematically applied in training that closely approximates match conditions and gradually attempted in competition to be honed to perfection. Few coaches and players have this knowledge base of psychological skills for rugby, and even fewer have the experience of applying them to practice and matches. Without such training, even the elite athletes can make mistakes that limit their play.

Certain elite players have learned by trial and error how to consistently practice and play with mental skills. At any level of competition, it is often the mental game rather than physical abilities that decides the winner. Even beginning players can benefit from effective mental training in practice and competition because they can speed up the learning of new rugby skills or enhance previously learned skills.

One word of caution before you begin to read the skill chapters: None of these skills are magical; they are all skills that must be practiced regularly. This practice routine should be done as a part of your regular training session for at least 15 to 20 minutes a day. These skills won't make you an international overnight, but they do help your game if you commit to practicing them. You must patiently and diligently practice these skills if you want to experience the game benefits.

For example, remember the first time you practiced a pass or a drop kick? Remember how inefficient and unskilled you were? Just like learning to execute a proper dive pass, the process is the same for learning mental skills, such as to set goals, relax or image effectively. Having knowledge about the skills is simply not enough. Effective learning involves (a) *knowledge*, acquiring a conceptual understanding of the components of the skill, (b) *modeling and acquisition*, watching others who demonstrate the skill and working on strategies and techniques for learning the skill and (c) *practice*, creating an opportunity to use the skill in training and competition. With mental skills you can practice anywhere—during weekly physical practices, before competition or at home in the evening. Daily correct practice is the key to changing your undesirable psych-up habits.

The process of skill learning involves seven steps that should be followed sequentially for learning and improvement to occur. The SUCCESS acronym describes each step in the process (see figure 1).

Selection of Components

The selection of components refers to defining the skill in behavioral terms. This first step involves breaking the skill into smaller components. For example, a rugby union skill such as ball retention in the ruck could be broken into body position, the power step into the opposition, continuing the drive onward, turning

Selection of components

Understanding commitment

Criteria for attainment

Choosing models

Extensive practice

Supplemental homework

Subsequent evaluation

Figure 1 The seven steps to successful physical and mental skills training.

back to your support and placing the ball. A psychological skill such as relaxation training could involve breaking progressive relaxation training into relaxed body position, deep breathing, muscle tension cycle and muscle release cycle.

Once the task is separated into components, you can begin practicing one part at a time. Knowing that you must practice each component in sequence also allows you to continually evaluate your progress on each part for regular motivation and information about your performance.

Understanding Commitment

Understanding commitment means presenting an understandable rationale for learning the skill. Once you know what you need to practice, you need to make sure you understand why it's important to master the skill.

Today's union game is characterized by across-the-field defensive walls that require quick recycling of the ball and quick movement outside. As a player, you know that if you lose the ball in contact, your performance suffers and your team is likely to lose.

From a mental skill standpoint, you are aware that if you have difficulty with prematch anxiety and don't practice a relaxation technique adequately, your overall performance may decline. Once you clearly understand the critical importance of these skills, however, you are more likely to commit yourself to the strenuous practice of the necessary skill.

Criteria for Attainment

Criteria for attainment means to specify a skill level that you wish to attain. Before you begin practice, you need to know your current level of skill execution and what level of correct performance you wish to attain. In other words, you need to specify target behaviors that you wish to achieve. You need to ask yourself the following: What behavior(s)? When? How often and under what conditions? Knowing exactly what you wish to attain beforehand helps to motivate and guide future practice of the skill.

For example, if you retain the ball only 40 percent of the time in your rucks, you may wish to attain a success level of 80 percent in your stated goal (see chapter 7 for team goals). If your heart rate is typically 150 beats per minute before kickoff and you feel uptight, you may wish to learn to relax and drop your heart rate to 120 before kickoff.

Choosing Models

For your body to internalize the proper execution of a skill, you have to develop an idea of what good execution and bad execution look and feel like. Therefore, when you choose your models, select ones that demonstrate both effective and ineffective use of the skill. Afterwards, you can develop a standard of achievement that provides consistent feedback so that you know whether you have achieved optimal performance or not.

Once you know the difference between good and bad performance and once you develop a standard, you can focus your effort on reaching your actual performance goal. For example, with a rucking retention skill, you would need to watch other players perform the skill; you would need to get a visual and verbal lesson from the coach; or you would need to watch videotapes that depict rucking skills. For a relaxation skill, you may

need to have a sport psychologist or coach take you through a relaxation procedure to feel the difference between being anxious and being relaxed before you play. You may even be able to watch other players use prematch strategies to get themselves to an optimal level of arousal.

Extensive Practice

Extensive practice requires opportunities to practice many matchlike situations. Practice the various components of your physical or mental skill to improve your execution. Use what is called the *part-whole method of practice*, where you practice each component separately and then put them together to practice the skill in the proper sequence and timing. Coaches and other players can give you feedback concerning your execution of the components and total skill. For mental skills, the coach or sport psychologist can give you feedback about thoughts or technique.

Once you have a basic grasp of the skill, try it before or during basic drills or scrimmages. For rucking retention, this might involve trying the skill first at half speed during a learning drill, then gradually performing it at full speed with more aggressive opposition. For a relaxation skill, first learn the long version of the skill by listening to a tape or working with a sport psychologist daily outside of practice. Gradually reduce the time it takes to relax until you can reduce tension in minutes with several tension-release cycles or just deep breathing and positive suggestions.

Supplemental Homework

For supplemental homework (transfer of training), generalize the skill to a variety of game situations and critical moments in competition by practicing it in simulated game situations of increasing difficulty. Gradually incorporate the skill into low-key competitions until you feel comfortable with your ability to execute it properly in important matches. Try it before or during a variety of game situations so that you can perform it in any difficult match situation. In other words, practice the way you expect to play. When you structure practices to mirror actual competitive situations, you feel as if you have been there before.

Applying Skills to Your Training Needs and Position Requirements

This book is designed to allow you to personalize your mental training program to meet your individual, positional or team needs. Chapter 1 begins with an opportunity for you to assess the mental and physical strengths and weaknesses that are critical to elite players in your rugby position. Once you identify which mental skills need improvement, you can begin planning your goals (Chapter 2) and setting up a regular training session in and out of practice to perfect your psychological skills.

Choose the mental skills that you have pinpointed as being weakest, then follow the training exercises to practice those skills in training for competition. Remember, just reading about a skill does not improve your skill level and mental preparation. You must be committed to regular practice of your mental game if you want your physical game to improve.

Once you have perfected the fundamental mental skills presented in part I and incorporated them into your game plan, you can move on to the team skills covered in part II. Coaches should be able to formulate comprehensive, year-round mental training plans for their teams. Examples of team skills and game situations are included in each chapter to allow you regular practice of these critical skills. Part II pulls together basic mental skills into a team format that can help coaches and athletes plan training sessions to enhance team skills such as decision making, creating team goals, formulating attacking and defensive strategies and designing team mental preparation and competitive routines. Opportunities for homework are provided in each chapter to allow your team to practice under competitive conditions. Our goal is to make your team more mentally tough.

Mental Skills As Life Skills

For most of us, rugby is only a small part of our lives, and some day in the future, active participation ceases for all of us. Rugby, though, can teach many participants skills that can help them be more effective in other life situations during and after their playing days. Basic psychological skills can be used across situations to become basic life skills, which any individual needs to survive. They are usually categorized as either *interpersonal skills*, skills

You need to rehearse physical and mental skills exactly as you expect to perform them in competition. Visualize it in your mind before executing it with your body. Because your goal is peak performance, you want to be able to make automatic physical adjustments or mental decisions in different competitive environments without much conscious effort. For example, for rucking retention, you can practice maintaining possession when no support is nearby, when you need to produce a quick ball on a diving tackle or when rolling back over to place a ball when you're facing the opposing team.

For a relaxation skill, this practice might involve doing a relaxation session the night or morning before a contest or a short deep-breathing session on the bus or during warm-ups. Incorporating deep breathing and relaxing thoughts for instantaneous relaxation before a lineout throw, scrum in rugby league, penalty play or penalty kick would be typical uses of relaxation skill in the height of competition. Many mental skills can be practiced in other important life events and become life skills. For example, once you learn to relax before matches, you can use that skill to relax before giving a speech or going for an interview.

Subsequent Evaluation

Finally, subsequent evaluation means devising drills or testing opportunities to make sure you have achieved the attainment level you set. Have someone collect statistical data or rate you on form or technique execution in practice and matches. Make sure they rate all the components of the skill you have identified. You can keep these training records as part of your performance profile (see chapter 1).

Constant evaluation of your strengths and weaknesses and your feedback showing improvement keeps you motivated towards attaining elite status in the execution of critical rugby skills. Many coaches today keep accurate statistics on individual and team tactical skills such as ball retention that are based on detailed match analysis of game videotapes. Some athletes have devised behavioral ratings and self-report inventories that evaluate how well they were mentally prepared during a match. For a problem such as anxiety management, there are validated scales available in many sport psychology self-help books or from sport psychologists that can help you to keep track of your progress towards being optimally aroused during a match.

used to communicate with a variety of individuals in different situations, or *intrapersonal skills*, commonly called psychological skills, which include both mental and physical skills.

In rugby, you can learn both kinds of skills and effectively transfer their use to nonsport situations. For example, if a rugby player has learned to effectively relax before and during matches, he could use the same skill to help him relax during other stressful life events, such as job interviews, social situations or examinations. Another primary goal in life could be developing personal competence: the ability to do life planning, to be self-reliant and to seek the resources of others. Personal competence can easily be taught through the use of rugby, then transferred over to daily life. These skills, however, must be carefully and systematically practiced in nonsport situations if they are to enhance performance in life.

For instance, when certain factors are present, these life skills can be generalized from rugby settings to nonsport settings. First the individual has to believe that the skills are important in other situations. Second he must be aware of which life skills he has mastered. Third he has to know how the life skills were learned. Next he must believe that he can effectively apply the life skills in other situations, then he must be open to trying these skills in other nonsport situations. This step usually requires the individual to seek out other people to help in these new situations. Finally, he must develop the ability to adjust to initial failures using the skills in nonsport settings and be willing to keep applying them. Athletes can be guided through this transfer process by coaches or sport psychologists without undue effort.

In sport, most sport psychologists emphasize the teaching and implementation of a small group of performance-enhancing life skills. These typically are arousal management, attention control, decision making, goal setting, positive self-talk, stress management, time management and others. These very skills, all described in this book, can be used in a number of life areas such as work planning, self-exploration and self-appraisal.

Other life skills learned in sport are often neglected by athletes (see figure 2). These skills can be taught for transfer from rugby using the same skill-learning steps described earlier. Coaches and sport psychologists can provide knowledge, experience, feedback and support to players to help ensure that these skills transfer quickly and efficiently.

Performance under pressure	Accepting feedback and criticism as part of learning
Organization	Self-evaluation
Meeting challenges	Wise decision making
Handling both success and failure	Setting and attaining goals
Acceptance of others' values and beliefs	Communication with others
Flexibility and success	Ability to learn
Patience	Working within the system
Risk taking	Self-motivation
Commitment and perseverance	
Knowing how to win and how to lose	
Working with people you don't necessarily like	
Respect for others	
Self-control	
Pushing yourself to the limit	
Recognizing limitations	
Competing without hatred	
Accepting responsibility for behavior	
Dedication	

Figure 2 Life skills learned through rugby and other sports



In the following chapters, you will have the opportunity to learn new life skills that will bring you improved performance in rugby if you make them a regular part of your training program. You can enhance your individual physical and mental skills and increase your team skills, all to improve overall team performance and lead to success on the pitch. If you use the skills systematically, your game will improve and you might become an international that we will watch and read about some day. At the very least, you will improve your game skills and enhance the quality of your life in other areas. Enjoy the journey!

MENTALLY TOUGH PLAYERS