

Mental Preparation

When a skater steps onto the ice he or she is tested both mentally and physically. Mental preparation helps a skater cope with the stress of performing and handling the inevitable success or failure of test and competitive figure skating.

Coaches and parents may need to help skaters modify their personality and negative behaviors/attitudes that contribute to setbacks and failure to rebound if personal goals are not achieved.

A person's personality includes factors such as their behavior, existing environment, present and past parenting, current stimulation, and daily attitude.

Mental skills are tools that can be acquired through training. An individual's depth of motivation and the potential of the skater's personal capacity to learn are rooted in their personality.

There is a wide variation of individual ability to develop and access, at will, mental tools:

- Activation
- Goal setting
- Relaxation
- Visualization
- Focus (and refocus)

An Ideal Performance State (IPS) can significantly increase a skater being able to improve their level of physical training and performance.

Mental factors are important even for beginning skaters; however, as a skater advances in skill development, it becomes increasingly important to master mental preparation.

Novice, Junior, and Senior tests are considered a High Performance phase. At these levels judges expect the difficult skills to be performed effortlessly. There is very little room for errors that can be accommodated before the risk of failure becomes great.

Impeccable timing and technical accuracy are necessary to execute the required skills. The High Performance phase does not allow for lapses in concentration associated with frustration and anger. A skater has to tolerate both physical and mental training.

As a skater approaches their personal ceiling of what is physically possible, it is strength of

their mental skills that will determine their success or failure to achieve their goals.

Gold Test performances start with a series of steep skill acquisition followed by multiple plateaus associated with learning specific elements in MITF, free skating, dance, etc. In free skating most skater's face predictable frustration and learning plateaus when acquiring the skills to perform a "clean" Axel, double Lutz and double Axel. Learning is not necessarily slowed – the totality of the skill acquisition just takes longer.

Pressure to sustain a uniform acquisition of skills is unrealistic. Frustration and anger just hinders progress if they are not controlled.

Mental training is a process that helps skaters cope with the inevitable ups and downs of acquiring new free skating skills. For skaters, who experience these problems, the cause can frequently be rooted outside of skating and the influence of the coach and choreographer.

Top athletes frequently use the services a professional psychologist to help develop the mental skills to help cope with deep underlying psychological problems.

Most athletes' self-doubts do not reach the level where they need a sports psychologist. Even if one may be indicated, not all parents can afford one. A sport psychologist needs to have a background in working with figure skaters and their parents.

The coach as an everyday part of working can accomplish the majority of mental training with individual. The amount of time coaches can spend on addressing mental training as a separate topic is limited by the off-ice access to the skater. The time on the ice needs to be spent on developing skating skills.

A coach's behavior and attitude towards training and competition provides a blueprint of expectations of the physical and mental skills a skater should acquire.

Coaches, who have and maintain good mental skills, set the example for the behavior they want in their skaters. It is a challenge to incorporate teaching mental skills, but the better coaches manage to incorporate creative ways to do so without losing ice and training time.

General concentration usually improves with age and can easily be associated with the skater's academic progress. Eliminating distractions is the same focus skaters use to allocate time to accomplish their homework and this pattern of success can be transferred to goal setting in skating.

Skaters who are constantly under self-induced stress are often the most volatile because of the depth of commitment and standard of skill required.

It is very important that families and coaches do not raise the skater's expectations which cannot be met. All skaters will occasionally be unable to perform as perfectly as they desire. For these skaters to be able to properly train physically, they must develop anger management skills.

Skaters cannot afford to lose training time if they are to acquire and perfect the physical skills necessary for success in figure skating. The time spent coping with and managing anger, frustration, and disappointment is wasted time.

Any skater who needs a significant amount of attention to manage negative mental moods is a very high maintenance student. Eventually, coaches will not be willing to waste a lot of ice time with students who frequently throw temper tantrums.

Self Control

The essence of flawless technique and artistry is rooted in physical and mental self-control. Only the athlete can possess the level of physical and mental self-control to execute complex skills when they are alone on the ice and recover from errors. Decisions associated with training techniques and tactical decisions benefit from discussions involving the coach and choreographer.

Achieving this degree of mastery of the sport requires a skater to incorporate mental training into his daily practice. Self-control, like any other skills, needs to be practiced to become part of every practice performance before it can be effectively incorporated in a test or competitive setting.

Goal Setting

Setting goals helps to establish an outline and path to achieve specific proficiency milestones associated with a timeline. Setting realistic and achievable long and short-term goals helps

skaters to maintain a targeted focus. Effective goals must be able to accommodate unexpected events and still be:

- Realistic
- Worthwhile
- Timely
- Flexible.

The coach and parent usually do goal setting in the early years, but responsibility must shift to the skater as they mature. Setting honest and effective goals relies on the complete objectivity of the participants.

Imagery

The term visualization is used when skaters are developing, improving, and personalizing their mental skills. Visualization is mental imagery in which the user runs through various skating skills and programs as an off-ice rehearsal without the physical performance. The process helps clarify body awareness, aids in reducing stress, and is very useful in stimulating creativity.

Concentration

Effective concentration is the ability to focus on relevant information at the appropriate time. Coaches and parents need to be aware of the need to persuade the skater to focus on relevant information rather than forcing them to fixate on a particular subject.

This distinction is of critical importance, but becomes more difficult as the skater becomes a teenager. Still, success may hinge on the skater being able to refocus as new information comes in they must redirected their attention quickly.

Many skaters use key words to help them mentally maintain or recover their focus in practice and during an actual performance. Key effective words that affect performance should be incorporated into their practice session. For example:

- Push harder
- Breath
- Slowdown
- Speedup

Relaxation

The ability to relax is important so a skater can get a good night's sleep or to recover from a stressful practice session. Complete relaxation as a training strategy is rarely used in the free skating training or competitive setting.

Relaxation is not the solution if a skater becomes tense and frustrated just prior to skating a test or competition program. True relaxation is allowing the mind to wander or

become unfocused, this is not an optimal state of mind in which to train or compete. Coaches use the term “relaxation” in a competitive or training setting as focusing their attention to relevant information the coach is attempting to convey.

Ideal Performance State

Some skaters describe the feeling of being “In the Moment or In the Zone” prior to performing their best. This is an Ideal Performance State and is the frame of mind that allows a skater to perform his or her best. The manner in which a skater gets to this point varies widely from skater to skater.

Skaters need to go from being very relaxed prior to the competition to a highly energized state for the successful performance when it counts. In the case of some parents, they need to delegate the handling of their skater because their nervousness affects the skater.

Many skaters have rituals that help them prior to testing and competing. They might follow a specific warm up pattern or engage in specific verbal exchange with their coach or a physical routine of getting up, eating, arriving at the rink and off-ice warm-ups prior to their performance. Ritual can be useful but superstition should be discouraged.

The more consistent a skater’s technical skills are, the easier it is to transfer them to the performance side of the sport. A highly qualified choreographer can quickly, efficiently and reliably

work with the primary coach and skater to develop an on-ice persona.

Having a training plan makes it easier to develop the initial outline of the free skating program. This rough plan will need to implement high levels of technical skills, as they are ready to be included in the program.

The skater must work on his or her stamina throughout the training season. Small revisions as often as necessary are preferred over major revisions. Skaters will need performance experience in front of audiences and judges to acquire confidence prior to the test and first qualifying competition.

Simulations are one tool used to help increase the volume of performance experience and are valuable, however, nothing really creates the experience of a test or competition like the real thing. It is precisely the genuine pressure of a situation that is not truly present in simulations that makes peak performance under pressure so difficult to train.

The cornerstones of the successful test and competition skater requires:

- Self-discipline
- Humor
- Personal responsibility
- Independent, yet controlled personality
- Unyielding positive attitude/self-image
- Willingness to accept challenge
- Commitment to the pursuit of excellence
- Unbridled passion/emotion to skate