

PARAGON 14-DAY MENTAL TOUGHNESS CHALLENGE

14 Days. 14 Mental Skills. One Stronger Team.

**A Practical Coach's Guide to Developing
Confidence • Resilience • Focus • Motivation •
Competitive Mindset**

For High School and Collegiate Coaches & Athletes

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*Six-Time National Champion Coach
Four-Time National Coach of the Year***

PARAGON COACHING RESOURCES

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About the Challenge & the Author

The Paragon 14-Day Mental Toughness Challenge

Mental toughness is not something athletes are simply born with. It is a collection of attitudes, habits, and mental skills developed through intentional practice. **Coaches can select individual lessons and activities that fit their needs or implement the complete 14-Day Challenge**, and every element is designed to be **educational, engaging, immediately applicable, and inspiring** for both coaches and athletes. The **Paragon 14-Day Mental Toughness Challenge** does two things... 1) It helps athletes strengthen those mental toughness skills one day at a time, and 2) It provides you, the coach, with a roadmap to help make this happen

Athletes will explore practical concepts such as **controlling what they can control, responding to mistakes, embracing pressure, developing confidence, practicing with purpose, building positive energy, trusting preparation, and committing to the process**. Each day introduces a mental toughness principle and challenges athletes to apply it in practice and competition.

The goal is not to eliminate doubt, pressure, mistakes, or adversity, but to help athletes **respond differently when those moments occur**. Mental toughness develops when athletes learn to reset, stay present, choose their response, and consistently practice the behaviors that lead to confident, resilient performance. **Fourteen days can introduce a mindset. Consistent practice can turn that mindset into a habit.**

About the Author — Dennis Janzen, Ph.D.

Dennis Janzen, Ph.D., is an accomplished coach, educator, and sport psychology professional who has spent his **50-year coaching career** helping athletes and coaches understand the mental side of performance. His coaching experience includes **six national championships and four National Coach of the Year honors**, as well as working with athletes at the Olympic, NCAA, and high school levels; he earned his Ph.D. in Applied Sports Psychology from the University of Southern California.

Janzen also served as **Director of Athletics at Fresno Pacific University from 2004–2013**. Today, through **Paragon Coaching Resources**, he develops university-accredited professional development courses, coaching resources, and practical mental-training tools that help coaches turn sport psychology principles into everyday coaching practices while developing the mental skills, leadership qualities, and team cultures necessary for sustained success. **His philosophy is simple: mental toughness is not developed by talking about it. It is developed by practicing it.**

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Part I

BUILDING

THE

FOUNDATION

Chapter 1 **Welcome to the Challenge** - *A Personal Welcome*

Chapter 2 **Five Principles of Mentally Tough Teams** - *Mental Toughness
Begins With Team Culture*

Chapter 3 **How to Use This Mental Toughness Challenge Playbook** -
Turning Mental Toughness Lessons into Daily Practice Habits

Chapter 1

Welcome to the Paragon 14-Day Mental Toughness Challenge

A Personal Welcome

Congratulations on taking an important step toward becoming a more intentional coach.

Whether you coach volleyball, basketball, football, soccer, baseball, softball, wrestling, track and field, golf, tennis, or any other sport, one truth remains constant: physical ability alone rarely determines who succeeds when the game is on the line. The teams that consistently perform at their best have learned to think differently before they ever play differently.

As coaches, we spend countless hours teaching technique, refining tactics, improving conditioning, and preparing game plans. We carefully organize practices, study opponents, and evaluate performance. Yet one of the greatest competitive advantages often receives the least amount of structured attention... the mental side of competition.

Mental toughness is not something athletes either have or do not have. It is not a personality trait reserved for elite performers. It is a collection of habits, attitudes, choices, and skills that can be taught, practiced, learned, reinforced, and improved every day.

That belief has shaped my coaching philosophy for decades. Throughout my 50+ year career as a coach, athletics administrator, professor, and sport psychology educator, I have had the privilege of working with athletes ranging from young, beginning competitors to Olympians, national champions, and All-Americans. While their personalities, sports, and abilities differed greatly, the athletes who consistently performed their best shared several common characteristics. They learned to respond rather than react. They embraced responsibility. They trusted preparation. They welcomed challenges instead of avoiding them. Most importantly, they understood that excellence is built one decision at a time.

Those lessons form the foundation of this 14-Day Mental Toughness Challenge.

Why This 14-Day Mental Toughness Challenge Is Different

Many books discuss mental toughness. They explain confidence, resilience, motivation, leadership, focus, and composure. While those concepts are valuable, many coaches finish reading them wondering,

"Now what do I do with this at practice tomorrow?"

This playbook was written to answer that question. Every page is designed around practical coaching. Every day's lesson can be taught in approximately ten minutes before or after

practice. Every discussion encourages athletes to think instead of simply listening. Every challenge asks athletes to intentionally practice a mental skill. Every reflection helps athletes develop greater self-awareness.

Rather than presenting mental toughness as a motivational speech, this playbook treats it as a daily training habit. Championship teams don't accidentally become mentally tough. They train for it.

The Paragon Coaching Philosophy

At Paragon Coaching Resources, we believe coaching is far more than teaching sport-specific skills. Great coaches develop complete athletes. They teach character alongside competition. They value relationships as much as results. They prepare athletes to succeed long after the final game has been played. The Paragon Coaching Philosophy is built upon five guiding beliefs.

1. Every Athlete Can Grow

Talent influences potential, but commitment determines development. Athletes are not finished products. Every practice presents an opportunity to improve physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially. Coaches create environments where growth is expected, mistakes become learning opportunities, and improvement is celebrated. Our question is never: *"How good is this athlete?"* Instead, we ask: *"How much better can this athlete become?"*

2. Culture Wins Before Talent Wins

Championship programs are built intentionally. Positive culture does not happen by accident. It is created through consistent expectations, daily habits, shared standards, accountability, and leadership. Culture determines how athletes respond when adversity arrives. Every practice either strengthens or weakens your team's culture. There is no neutral day.

3. Confidence Is Built, Not Given

Confidence is not created through compliments. Nor is it created by winning alone. Lasting confidence develops when athletes repeatedly prepare well, solve difficult problems, overcome setbacks, and experience steady improvement. Our goal is not to convince athletes they are confident. Our goal is to help them become confident.

4. Mental Toughness Is Trainable

Just as athletes practice serving, shooting, passing, tackling, swinging, or putting, they can also practice responding to adversity, controlling emotions, maintaining focus, communicating positively, and competing under pressure. Mental toughness improves through deliberate repetition. Like any athletic skill, it grows stronger with intentional practice.

5. Coaching Is Leadership

Athletes often remember far less about the score than they remember about the coach. They remember encouragement. They remember trust. They remember accountability. They remember belief. Every conversation either builds or diminishes influence. Every interaction is leadership.

The Four Cornerstones of Mentally Tough Athletes

Throughout this challenge you will see four ideas repeated over and over. These become the foundation for everything else.

1. Own Your Response

- a. Athletes cannot control every circumstance.
- b. They always control their response.
- c. Ownership replaces excuses.
- d. Responsibility replaces blame.
- e. Growth replaces complacency.

2. Trust Your Preparation

- a. Confidence is built long before competition begins.
- b. Athletes who prepare consistently compete more freely.
- c. Preparation reduces fear.
- d. Preparation builds belief.
- e. Preparation creates confidence.

3. Reset Quickly

- a. Mistakes happen.
- b. Officials miss calls.
- c. Opponents make great plays.
- d. Championship athletes acknowledge setbacks without allowing those setbacks to define the next play.
- e. Their greatest strength is not perfection. It is recovery.

4. Compete for Something Bigger

- a. The best competitors understand that their performance affects everyone around them.
- b. They compete for teammates.
- c. For family.
- d. For school.
- e. For shared goals.
- f. Purpose fuels perseverance.

How to Accomplish the Paragon 14-Day Mental Toughness Challenge

This is not intended to be another book that sits on a shelf. It is designed to be used. Each day includes practical tools that can easily fit into your normal practice schedule.

For every daily lesson you will find:

- **Today's Theme**—one key mental skill.
- **Why This Matters**—the coaching perspective behind the lesson.
- **Coach's Locker Room**—three coaching talking points.
- **Team Huddle**—guided discussion questions.
- **Practice Integration**—ways to teach the lesson during practice.
- **The Paragon Challenge**—one behavior athletes intentionally practice.
- **Coach's Observation Notebook**—what to watch during practice.
- **Athlete Reflection**—a brief journaling exercise.
- **Coach's Clipboard**—quick reminders.
- **Research Into Practice**—sport psychology translated into coaching language.
- **Championship Conversation**—a story illustrating the day's lesson.
- **Coaching Matters Connections**—additional articles that reinforce the concept.

You may use this challenge over fourteen consecutive practices, throughout preseason, once per week during the season, or whenever your team needs a renewed mental focus. The timing matters less than the consistency.

Before You Begin

Before turning the page, make one commitment. Don't simply read this playbook. Teach it. Discuss it. Model it. Reinforce it. Celebrate it. Correct it. Live it.

Athletes become mentally tougher not because they hear a great speech, but because they repeatedly practice great habits under the guidance of a coach who believes those habits matter. If you are willing to make that commitment, this challenge can change more than

your team's performance. It can influence your team's culture, relationships, confidence, resilience, and ultimately the lives of the young people entrusted to your leadership.

Welcome to the journey. Let's begin building mentally tougher athletes, one practice, one conversation, and one decision at a time. By the time we reach the daily lessons, you will already understand the philosophy behind the challenge, making each exercise more meaningful.

Chapter 2

Five Principles of Mentally Tough Teams

Mental Toughness Begins With Team Culture

When most people hear the phrase *mental toughness*, they often picture an athlete performing under extreme pressure. They imagine the volleyball player serving an ace at match point. The basketball player taking the final shot with the game tied. The quarterback leading a fourth-quarter comeback. The golfer making a difficult putt on the final hole.

Those moments certainly require mental toughness, but they do not create mental toughness. They reveal it. The ability to perform under pressure is developed long before the pressure arrives. It is built through hundreds of small decisions made during ordinary practices, routine conversations, challenging workouts, and difficult moments throughout the season.

Mental toughness is not an emergency response. It is a daily habit. The strongest teams are not mentally tough because they have exceptional athletes. Many teams have talent. Many teams have experienced players. Many teams have physical ability.

The difference is that mentally tough teams develop a culture where the right behaviors are expected, practiced, and reinforced every day. They understand that talent may win moments, but culture wins seasons. The purpose of this chapter is to identify five principles that create the foundation for a mentally tough team.

Principle 1 - Ownership

Mentally Tough Teams Own Everything - Ownership Replaces Excuses

The first characteristic of mentally tough teams is ownership. Ownership is the willingness to accept responsibility for preparation, effort, attitude, communication, and response. It does not mean athletes blame themselves for everything. It does not mean coaches ignore legitimate problems. It does mean that successful teams consistently ask: "What can we do better?" rather than: "Who is responsible for this problem?"

Excuses are attractive because they protect our emotions. When athletes blame the referee, the weather, a teammate, the opponent, or circumstances beyond their control, they temporarily protect their confidence. But excuses also remove their power.

If someone else controls the problem, then someone else must create the solution. Ownership places the solution back in the athlete's hands.

What Ownership Looks Like

A mentally tough athlete says: "I missed that assignment. I need to improve." "I lost focus. I will reset." "I was not prepared. I need to change my habits." "I can control my effort and attitude."

An athlete without ownership says: "The official cost us the game." "My teammate made me look bad." "Coach doesn't understand." "The circumstances were unfair."

The difference between these statements is not just attitude. The difference is power. Ownership creates growth. Excuses create limitations.

Coach's Challenge

Ask yourself: **“Does my team (or a particular athlete) naturally look for solutions, or do they naturally look for someone to blame?”**

The answer often reveals the culture you have created. Coaches need to teach ownership by modeling ownership. When coaches make mistakes, they can demonstrate accountability: "I could have prepared you better for that situation." "I need to communicate that expectation more clearly." "I made a decision that did not work. Let's learn from it." Athletes notice when coaches practice what they preach.

Principle 2 – Control

Mentally Tough Teams Control What They Can Control - Energy Management Is Competitive Advantage

Every athlete has limited emotional and mental energy. The question is not whether athletes spend energy. The question is where they spend it. Some athletes spend their energy arguing with officials. Some spend their energy worrying about opponents. Some spend their energy thinking about mistakes from earlier in the game. Some spend their energy worrying about things that have not happened yet.

Mentally tough athletes learn to protect their energy and invest it where it matters most. They focus on controllables.

The Circle of Control

Every athlete has three areas of focus.

Things I Control

- a. My preparation
- b. My effort
- c. My attitude
- d. My communication
- e. My response
- f. My focus

Things I Influence

- a. Teammate energy
- b. Team chemistry
- c. Practice environment
- d. Leadership

Things I Cannot Control

- a. Officials
- b. Opponents
- c. Weather
- d. Playing time decisions
- e. Past mistakes
- f. Final outcomes

Mentally tough teams spend most of their energy in the first category. They influence the second. They release the third.

Coach's Challenge

During practice the coach should listen carefully. The athletes will tell you a lot about how they are handling the mental part of performance. How often does your team discuss things they cannot control? How often do they discuss solutions?

A powerful team question is: "Is this something we can control?" If the answer is no, redirect the focus. Mental toughness is often the ability to stop spending energy on things that do not deserve it.

Principle 3 – The “Next Play” Mental Re-Set

Mentally Tough Teams Respond Quickly

Every sport has moments of failure. A missed serve. A turnover. A strikeout. A missed assignment. A poor decision.

The question is never: "Will we make mistakes?"

The question is: "How quickly will we recover?" Championship teams are not mistake-free teams. They are teams that recover faster. They understand that the previous play cannot be changed, but the next play can.

The ability to reset is one of the most important mental skills an athlete can develop.

The Three-Step Reset

Mentally tough athletes learn a simple process:

- 1. Recognize** - Acknowledge what happened. "That didn't go well."
- 2. Release** - Let go of the emotional reaction. Take a breath. Move forward.
- 3. Refocus** - Return attention to the next responsibility. "What does my team need from me now?"

Coach's Challenge

Pay attention to your athletes after mistakes. Their reactions will tell you a lot.

Do athletes:

- a. drop their heads?
- b. show frustration?
- c. blame others?
- d. become quieter?
- e. lose confidence?

Or do they:

- a. encourage teammates?
- b. communicate?
- c. prepare for the next opportunity?
- d. respond with confidence?

The response after adversity often reveals the true culture of a team.

Principle 4 - Confidence

Mentally Tough Teams Trust Their Preparation - Confidence Is Earned

Many athletes want confidence before they compete. Championship athletes understand that confidence comes from preparation. Confidence is not something coaches can simply give athletes. A coach can encourage. A coach can support. A coach can believe. But athletes develop genuine confidence when they repeatedly prove to themselves: "I am prepared." "I have worked." "I know what to do." "I can handle this moment."

Preparation Creates Freedom

Athletes who trust their preparation play differently. They do not hesitate. They do not constantly question themselves. They do not fear mistakes. They compete. Preparation allows athletes to focus on execution rather than uncertainty. The athlete who prepares with purpose earns the freedom to perform with confidence.

Coach's Challenge

Ask your athletes: "What have you done this week that should make you confident?" If they cannot answer, confidence becomes dependent on feelings. If they can answer, confidence becomes connected to evidence.

Principle 5 – Purpose Creates Perseverance

Mentally Tough Athletes Compete for Something Bigger Than Themselves

Mentally, the strongest athletes are driven by something deeper than winning. They have purpose. They understand that their actions affect teammates. They understand that every practice impacts the people around them. They understand that leadership is not about being the loudest person. It is about making those around you better. A mentally tough athlete asks: "How can I help my team today?" They don't just focus on, "What can I get today?"

The Power of Shared Standards

Great teams create standards together. They decide:

- a. How we communicate.
- b. How we respond.
- c. How we prepare.
- d. How we handle adversity.
- e. How we treat teammates.

When standards are shared, accountability becomes easier. Athletes are no longer trying to satisfy a coach's expectations. They are protecting something they helped create.

Coach's Clipboard

Remember these five principles:

1. Ownership creates growth.
2. Controllables protect energy.
3. Quick resets create resilience.
4. Preparation builds confidence.
5. Purpose strengthens commitment.

A mentally tough team is not built in the final minutes of a close game. It is built in the ordinary moments when nobody is watching.

Research Into Practice

Sport psychology research consistently demonstrates that psychological skills improve through intentional practice. Just as physical skills require repetition, mental skills such as focus, confidence, emotional regulation, and resilience become stronger when coaches deliberately teach and reinforce them.

The mistake many coaches make is assuming mental toughness is developed automatically through competition. Competition reveals mental skills. Practice develops them.

Championship Quote

"Champions keep playing until they get it right." Billie Jean King

Great competitors understand that setbacks are part of the process. The difference is not whether challenges occur. The difference is how athletes respond.

Championship Conversation

A coach once told his team: "We are not going to measure ourselves by whether we win every point. We are going to measure ourselves by whether we respond the right way after every point."

That simple statement changed the team's culture. Players stopped focusing only on results. They began focusing on responses. They celebrated with teammates who recovered quickly. They recognized effort, communication, and composure. Over time, the

team became difficult to defeat. Not because they avoided adversity, but because adversity no longer controlled them.

Team Reflection Questions

Before beginning the Paragon 14-Day Mental Toughness Challenge, discuss these questions with your team:

1. Which of the five principles is our greatest strength?
2. Which principle needs the most improvement?
3. What behaviors would people see if our team became mentally tougher?
4. What is one commitment each athlete can make to strengthen our culture?

Final Thought

Mental toughness is not a personality trait. It is a team decision. Every athlete contributes to the mental strength of a program. Every conversation matters. Every response matters. Every practice matters.

The question is not: "Are we mentally tough?" The better question is: "What are we doing today to become mentally tougher?"



Chapter 3

How to Use This Mental Toughness Challenge Playbook

Turning Mental Toughness Lessons into Daily Practice Habits

Mental Toughness Is Built Through Daily Repetition

The greatest misunderstanding about mental toughness is that it appears only in important moments. People often notice mental toughness when an athlete performs under pressure. They see the game-winning shot, the comeback victory, the final point, the clutch performance.

But they rarely see the thousands of small moments that created that performance. They do not see the athlete who chose discipline over distraction. They do not see the player who responded positively after making mistakes in practice. They do not see the teammate who encouraged others when nobody was watching. They do not see the daily conversations that shaped the athlete's mindset. Mental toughness is not created during the biggest moments. It is revealed during them.

The purpose of this playbook is to help coaches intentionally develop the mental skills that allow athletes and teams to perform at their best when pressure arrives. The key word is **intentionally**.

Great coaches do not hope their athletes become mentally tough. They teach it. They model it. They reinforce it. They create environments where mental toughness becomes part of the team's identity.

The Paragon 14-Day Mental Toughness Challenge Philosophy

This challenge is built on one simple idea: What we practice repeatedly becomes who we become. Athletes know this physically. A basketball player becomes a great shooter through repeated practice, not by hearing a lecture. A volleyball player develops a consistent serve through repetition, and a golfer improves putting by practicing, not just discussing technique.

The same principle applies mentally. Confidence, resilience, and focus are not developed through encouragement alone. They are built by repeatedly practicing the behaviors that create them, responding positively to mistakes, recovering from setbacks, and refocusing after distractions. **Like physical skills, mental toughness is a skill that must be trained every day.**

How the Paragon 14-Day Mental Toughness Challenge Works

The challenge is designed to be flexible enough for any high school or collegiate athletics program. A coach can use it in several ways.

Option One: Two-Week Team Challenge

The most direct approach is completing one lesson each practice day for two consecutive weeks. This works especially well during:

- a. Preseason preparation
- b. Summer Training
- c. The beginning of a season
- d. Playoff preparation

The advantage of this approach is momentum. Athletes begin connecting the lessons together and recognizing that mental toughness is a complete system.

Option Two: Weekly Team Development

Some coaches prefer a slower approach. One lesson per week allows more time for:

- a. Discussion
- b. Reflection
- c. Practice application
- d. Leadership development

The entire challenge can become a fourteen-week team culture program.

Option Three: Preseason Mental Training Series

Many coaches spend significant time developing physical conditioning and technical skills before competition begins. This challenge can become the mental training component of preseason preparation. The team begins the season with a shared vocabulary:

- a. Ownership
- b. Controllables
- c. Reset
- d. Confidence
- e. Purpose
- f. Commitment

Those words become part of the team's identity.

The Daily Structure

Each day follows the same format. Consistency matters because athletes learn better when they know what to expect. Note the order and descriptions below.

1. Today's Theme

Every day begins with one specific mental skill. Examples include:

Day 1: Own Your Mindset - Athletes learn responsibility and ownership.

Day 3: Reset Breath - Athletes learn how to mentally recover and re-set quickly after mistakes.

Day 13: Play With Confidence - Athletes learn to trust preparation and compete more freely. The goal is not to overwhelm athletes with too many ideas. The goal is to build one mental toughness skill at a time.

2. Why This Matters

Every lesson begins by answering questions like: "Why is this important? How will doing this 14-Day Challenge make us/me a better team/player?" Athletes are more likely to embrace a concept when they understand its purpose.

A coach should avoid presenting mental training as another assignment. Instead, connect it to performance. When athletes see the direct application, they will be much more committed to the processes of learning mental toughness skills. When they begin to actually see results, then serious mental toughness growth will occur.

For example: "Learning how to reset after mistakes is not just about feeling better. It directly impacts our ability to compete on the next play." Being able to effectively reset mentally for the "next play" has tremendous impact on confidence levels. Mental skills are performance skills.

3. Coach's Locker Room

This section provides the conversation starter for coaches. The goal is not to give a speech. The goal is to begin a meaningful conversation. The best coaches are not always the coaches who talk the most. They are the coaches who create environments where athletes think, reflect, and take ownership.

Use the Coach's Locker Room section as a starting point, then make it your own. Make your own through your stories, experiences, team circumstances, and your own personality. The most powerful coaching messages are authentic.

4. Team Huddle

Discussion is one of the most important parts of this challenge. Many coaches underestimate the power of asking athletes thoughtful questions. A question communicates: "Your thoughts matter." "Your experiences matter." "Your voice matters."

The goal is not for athletes to provide the "correct" answer. The goal is for athletes to develop awareness. Great questions create great conversations. Great conversations create great cultures.

5. Practice Integration

This section answers the most important coaching question: "How do we actually teach this?" A mental skill should never remain a concept. It must become behavior.

For example: If the lesson is about positive communication, the coach might create a practice expectation: "Every athlete must give one positive communication statement after every drill." If the lesson is about responding to mistakes: "After every error, athletes must demonstrate the reset routine." Mental toughness becomes real when athletes practice it.

Note: Ask each of your athletes what their mental reset routine is after they have made a mistake. Ask the same thing after they have made a good play. If they can clearly describe their reset routine, then they are well on their way to becoming mentally tough competitors. If they can't, then help that athlete develop their own, specific mental reset routine.

6. The Paragon Challenge

Every day includes one simple challenge. The purpose of each daily challenge is to move from discussion to action.

Examples:

Ownership Challenge - Take responsibility for every mistake. No excuses.

Energy Challenge - Bring positive energy to every practice activity.

Mental Reset Challenge - Utilize their own personal mental reset routine immediately after a mistake, and after a good play.

Small actions create big habits.

7. Coach's Observation Notebook

Coaches should become students of their teams. During each lesson, watch.

Do athletes:

- a. accept responsibility?
- b. encourage teammates?
- c. respond to adversity?
- d. communicate effectively?
- e. demonstrate leadership?

Mental toughness is not always visible in statistics. Sometimes the most important moments happen away from the scoreboard.

8. Athlete Reflection

Reflection transforms experience into learning. At the end of each lesson, athletes should answer a simple question.

Examples:

- a. "What is one response I want to improve?"
- b. "What attitude did I bring today?"
- c. "How did my actions impact my teammates?"

Reflection develops self-awareness. Self-awareness creates growth.

9. “Coaching Matters” Connections

Every lesson connects coaches to additional Paragon Coaching Resources articles. The purpose is not simply additional reading. The purpose is to continue learning. Great coaches are lifelong learners. The best coaches are always searching for better ways to serve their athletes.

Check out the [Paragon Coaching Resources](#) website and the blogs on the [“Coaching Matters”](#) pulldown.

Coach Commitment

Before beginning this challenge, make a commitment to your athletes.

My Commitment as a Coach

I commit to intentionally developing the mental skills of my athletes.

I commit to understanding that mental toughness is taught, not assumed.

I commit to modeling the behaviors I expect from my athletes.

I commit to creating an environment where mistakes become opportunities to learn.

I commit to building a culture based on ownership, confidence, resilience, and teamwork.

I understand that every practice is an opportunity to develop not only better athletes, but better people.

Athlete Commitment

Before beginning the challenge, invite your athletes to make their own commitment.

My Commitment as an Athlete

I commit to being responsible for my attitude, effort, and response.

I commit to focusing on what I can control.

I commit to learning from mistakes instead of being defined by them.

I commit to encouraging my teammates and contributing positively to our culture.

I commit to trusting the process and embracing opportunities to grow.

I understand that mental toughness is developed through daily choices.



Coach's Clipboard

Remember:

- Mental toughness is trained.
- Culture is created.
- Habits become identity.
- Conversations shape beliefs.
- Daily actions determine results.

Research Into Practice

Psychological skills training research consistently demonstrates that mental skills improve when athletes receive instruction, practice opportunities, feedback, and reinforcement.

The same principles that improve physical performance improve mental performance.

Athletes need:

- clear expectations,
- intentional practice,
- consistent feedback,
- opportunities to apply skills under pressure.

Mental toughness is not developed by accident. It is developed through a process.

Championship Quote

"The will to win is not nearly as important as the will to prepare to win."

— Vince Lombardi

Preparation creates confidence. Preparation creates trust. Preparation creates the foundation for championship performance.

Championship Conversation

A championship coach once told his team: "We don't rise to the occasion. We fall back on our preparation." His athletes originally thought he was talking only about physical preparation. Over time, they realized he meant everything: How they communicated. How they responded to mistakes. How they handled pressure. How they supported teammates.

Preparation was not just what happened before competition. Preparation was who they became every day.

Final Thought

This challenge is not about completing fourteen lessons. It is about creating fourteen opportunities to build a stronger team culture.

The goal is not simply for athletes to know more about mental toughness. The goal is for athletes to become mentally tougher. One conversation. One practice. One decision. One day at a time. The journey begins now.

Check out the [Paragon Coaching Resources](#) website and the blogs on the [“Coaching Matters”](#) pulldown.

Part II

THE 14-DAY MENTAL TOUGHNESS CHALLENGE

Chapter 4 – Day 1	Own Your Mindset - <i>Great Athletes Own Their Response Before They Change Their Results.</i>
Chapter 5 – Day 2	Control the Controllables - <i>Great Athletes Protect Their Energy by Focusing on What They Can Influence.</i>
Chapter 6 – Day 3	Reset Breath - <i>Great Athletes Recover Quickly Because They Know the Next Play Matters Most.</i>
Chapter 7 – Day 4	Self-Talk - <i>The Most Important Voice You Hear Is Your Own.</i>
Chapter 8 – Day 5	Visualization - <i>Great Athletes See Success Before They Experience It.</i>
Chapter 9 – Day 6	Embrace Discomfort - <i>Growth Begins Where Comfort Ends.</i>
Chapter 10 – Day 7	Learn From Failure - <i>Every Setback Holds the Seed of Future Success.</i>
Chapter 11 – Day 8	Next Play - <i>Championship Teams Win the Moment They Are In.</i>
Chapter 12 – Day 9	Compete With Intent - <i>Great Athletes Never Leave Their Effort to Chance</i>
Chapter 13 – Day 10	Team Energy - <i>The Attitude You Bring Becomes Part of Your Team's Culture</i>
Chapter 14 – Day 11	Handle Pressure - <i>Pressure Reveals What Preparation Has Built</i>
Chapter 15 – Day 12	Routine - <i>Consistency Creates Confidence</i>
Chapter 16 – Day 13	Play With Confidence - <i>Trust Your Preparation and Compete with Freedom</i>
Chapter 17 – Day 14	Commit to the Process - <i>Becoming the Person and Team You Want to Become</i>

Chapter 4

Day 1: Own Your Mindset

Great Athletes Own Their Response Before They Change Their Results

Today's Theme - OWN YOUR MINDSET

Key Principle: Mentally tough athletes understand that while they cannot control every situation, they always control their response.

Why This Matters

Every coach has experienced the frustration of watching an athlete make a mistake and immediately look for someone or something to blame. The official made a bad call. The referee missed the foul. The weather affected performance. A teammate made an error. The opponent got lucky. The coach did not explain something clearly enough.

Sometimes those explanations may even be accurate. Difficult circumstances are part of competition, and athletes will face situations they cannot control.

But the difference between average teams and championship teams is not whether adversity occurs. Adversity happens to everyone. The difference is how athletes respond.

Mentally tough athletes develop the habit of asking: "What can I do next?" instead of: "Whose fault is this?"

Ownership is the foundation of growth. When athletes take ownership, they regain control. They stop waiting for circumstances to change and begin changing what they can influence their effort, attitude, preparation, communication, and response.

A team built on ownership becomes a team built on confidence. Athletes trust teammates who accept responsibility. Coaches trust athletes who respond maturely. Teams improve faster when everyone focuses on solutions instead of excuses.

The first step in building mental toughness is teaching athletes a simple truth:

Your mindset determines your response, and your response determines your growth.

Check out the following "Coaching Matters" blog:

[The Winning Edge: 10 Ways Pre-Skill Mental Routines Can Transform an Athlete's Game](#)

Coach's Locker Room

Teaching Athletes to Own Their Mindset

Coaching Message #1: "You Are Responsible for Your Response"

Every athlete faces difficult moments. You will miss shots, make mistakes, lose points, have bad practices, and face unfair situations. **That is part of sports.** Successful athletes separate what happens from how they respond. You may not control the mistake, official, or opponent, **but you always control your response.** Championship athletes don't waste time trying to change what they cannot control; they immediately focus on what they can do next.

Coaching Message #2: "Excuses Take Away Your Power"

An excuse may make us feel better briefly, but it also gives away our ability to improve. If the official caused the problem, the official has the solution. If a teammate caused it, the teammate has the solution. If circumstances caused it, circumstances have the solution. **But when we take ownership, we regain the power to make a change. Ownership doesn't mean everything is your fault; it means you are responsible for your response.**

Coaching Message #3: "Championship Teams Look Forward"

"Every great competitor makes mistakes. The difference is that great competitors do not stay stuck in those mistakes. They learn. They adjust. They move forward. Our team identity will not be determined by whether we make mistakes. Every team makes mistakes. Our identity will be determined by how quickly and how positively we respond."

Team Huddle

Building an Ownership Culture

Question 1: Where do athletes commonly make excuses?

Before athletes answer, remind them that "Every team has excuses. The goal is not to pretend they do not exist. The goal is to recognize them so we can replace them." Possible discussion areas:

- blaming officials
- blaming teammates
- blaming lack of playing time
- blaming circumstances or past mistakes

Follow-up: "How do excuses affect our ability to improve?"

Question 2: What does ownership look like after a mistake?

Frame the discussion: "Everyone makes mistakes. The question is what happens in the next five seconds."

Discuss examples:

- An athlete who immediately communicates.
- An athlete who encourages a teammate.
- An athlete who adjusts technique.
- An athlete who stays engaged.

Ask: "What would someone watching our team notice about the way we respond?"

Question 3: When is it hardest to take ownership?

Frame the discussion: "Ownership is easy when things are going well. The real test comes when things are difficult."

Discuss:

- losing
- pressure situations
- criticism
- mistakes
- disappointment

Ask: "Why do difficult moments reveal our true habits?"

Question 4 - What would change if everyone on our team practiced ownership every day?

Encourage athletes to think beyond individual performance.

Discuss:

- practice environment
- team chemistry
- trust
- leadership
- accountability

Ask: "What type of team would we become?" What type of team do we want to become?

Practice Integration

Teaching Ownership During Practice - Mental toughness becomes meaningful when athletes practice it. Here are several ways to integrate today's lesson.

Ownership Drill: "Next Action" - During competitive drills, when an athlete makes an error, require them to immediately identify their next action. Examples can include:

- Volleyball: "I missed the serve. Next serve, aggressive target."
- Basketball: "I missed the shot. Next possession, better defensive effort."
- Soccer: "I lost possession. Next play, win it back."
- Golf: "Bad shot. Next shot, commit to the process."

The goal is not perfection. The goal is immediate ownership.

The No-Excuse Challenge - During practice, eliminate negative explanations. Not negative emotion. Not accountability. Just excuses.

- Replace: "The pass was bad." with, "I need to adjust my movement."
- Replace: "The official missed it." with "How do we respond now?"
- Replace: "I wasn't ready." with: "What will I do differently next time?"

Leadership Opportunity - Assign athletes to recognize ownership during practice. At the end of practice ask: "Who demonstrated ownership today?" Celebrate the behavior you want repeated.



The Paragon Challenge

Today's Challenge: Own Every Response

For one practice, challenge the athletes to commit to:

- No blaming.
- No excuses.
- Positive body language after mistakes.
- Immediate focus on the next action.

At the end of practice, ask: "How did ownership change the way we competed?"

Coach's Observation Notebook

During practice, watch for:

- **Body Language**
 - Who responds positively after mistakes?
 - Who shows frustration?
 - Who allows one mistake to affect the next play?
- **Communication**
 - Who encourages teammates?
 - Who accepts feedback?
 - Who takes responsibility?
- **Emotional Control**
 - Who stays composed?
 - Who reacts emotionally?
 - Who helps teammates recover?
- **Leadership**
 - Who demonstrates ownership without being asked? These athletes are often your future team leaders.

Athlete Reflection

Have athletes complete this reflection after practice:

Personal Ownership Reflection

1. What is one excuse I sometimes make?
2. How does that excuse prevent me from improving?
3. What ownership statement will I replace it with?
4. What is one situation tomorrow where I can demonstrate greater ownership?

Coach's Clipboard

Remember:

- Ownership creates confidence.
- Excuses create limitations.
- Responses reveal character.
- Accountability creates trust.
- Championship cultures begin with personal responsibility.

Research Into Practice

One of the strongest predictors of athletic development is an athlete's belief that improvement is connected to effort, learning, and intentional practice. This concept is often associated with a growth mindset, the belief that abilities can develop through commitment and learning.

Athletes with a growth mindset view mistakes differently. A mistake is not evidence that they cannot succeed. A mistake is information. It tells them what needs attention.

Coaches help develop this mindset by changing the language surrounding mistakes. Instead of: "Why did you do that?" Ask: "What did you learn from that?" Instead of: "Don't make that mistake again." Ask: "What adjustment will help you next time?"

The language of ownership creates the mindset of growth.

Championship Quote "The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall." Nelson Mandela

Championship athletes are not defined by avoiding adversity. They are defined by responding to it.

Championship Conversation

A coach once watched one of his players make the same mistake repeatedly during practice. After the third error, the athlete became frustrated and said: "Coach, I don't know why this keeps happening." The coach responded: "That is actually the best question you could ask. Now let's find the answer."

Instead of allowing frustration to become an excuse, the coach turned the moment into ownership. Together they identified the problem. Together they developed a solution.

The athlete learned something much more valuable than a technical correction. The athlete learned: "I am capable of improving." That is the heart of ownership.

Coaching Matters Connections

Continue the conversation with these Paragon Coaching Resources articles:

Coaching Without Regret: Avoiding Common Coaching Regrets and Learning from Mistakes

This article reinforces the importance of coaches modeling ownership. Great coaching requires reflection, accountability, and the willingness to learn from decisions.

Failing Forward: Fostering a Practice Culture that Accelerates Learning and Confidence

This article explores how coaches can transform mistakes from moments of frustration into opportunities for improvement and growth.

Success Starts in the Mind: Ideas for Strengthening the Growth Mindset in You Players

This article explores how a growth mindset is the key to improvement and learning. But what really is a “Growth Mindset”? ...and how do I really apply this to my team and practices?

Final Thought

Every championship culture begins with one individual decision:

I am responsible for my response.

Athletes cannot control every situation. They cannot control every opponent. They cannot control every outcome. But they can always control their mindset. And when athletes learn to own their mindset, they begin to own their performance.

Chapter 5

Day 2: Control the Controllables

Great Athletes Protect Their Energy by Focusing on What They Can Influence

Today's Theme - CONTROL THE CONTROLLABLES

Key Principle: Mentally tough athletes do not waste energy fighting things they cannot change. They invest their energy into the actions, attitudes, and choices that improve performance.

Why This Matters

Every athlete has limited mental and emotional energy. The best competitors understand that where they spend that energy directly affects how they perform. Some athletes spend their energy worrying about opponents. Some argue with officials. Some replay mistakes from earlier in the game. Some worry about playing time, rankings, statistics, or outcomes they cannot guarantee.

The problem is not that these thoughts exist. Every athlete experiences them. The problem is allowing uncontrollable things to steal attention away from controllable actions.

Championship athletes learn a powerful competitive skill:

They separate what they can control from what they cannot control.

They understand that they cannot control the weather, the officials, the opponent's performance, the crowd, the scoreboard, or what already happened. But they can control:

- their preparation,
- their effort,
- their attitude,
- their communication,
- their focus,
- their response.

This simple distinction can transform a team's mindset. Instead of asking: "Why is this happening to us?" Mentally tough teams ask: "What can we do right now?" Instead of focusing on the outcome: "We need to win this game." They focus on the process... "We need to execute this possession." Instead of worrying about things outside their control... "What if the official makes a bad call?" They focus on their response... "How will we respond when adversity happens?" The best athletes are not the athletes who experience fewer distractions. They are the athletes who have learned what deserves their attention.

Coach's Locker Room

Teaching Athletes to Focus Their Energy

Coaching Message #1: "Your Energy Is a Resource"

"Every day you have a limited amount of energy. You can spend that energy complaining, worrying, blaming, and stressing about things you cannot change. Or you can invest that energy into preparation, effort, communication, and improvement. Championship athletes understand that energy is valuable. They do not give it away to things that do not help them perform."

Coaching Message #2: "Control Creates Confidence"

"When athletes focus on things they cannot control, they feel helpless. When athletes focus on things they can control, they feel empowered. Confidence grows when you repeatedly prove to yourself: 'I can control my effort.' 'I can control my preparation.' 'I can control my response.' The more you focus on controllables, the more confidence you develop."

Coaching Message #3: "Great Teams Win the Moment They Are In"

"Too many athletes try to play the entire game at once. They worry about the final score. They worry about what might happen later. They worry about consequences.

Great competitors focus on the moment in front of them. The next play. The next decision. The next opportunity. Championship performance is built one controllable action at a time."



Check out the following “Coaching Matters” blog that can help further frame the notion of “Controlling the Controllables”:

[Finishing Strong: Lessons from Competitive Sport and Life](#)

This article reinforces the importance of focusing on habits, preparation, and process rather than becoming distracted by circumstances outside our control.

Team Huddle

Building a Controllables Mindset

Question 1: What things do athletes often waste energy worrying about?

Before discussion, explain: "Everyone has distractions. Mental toughness does not mean distractions disappear. It means we learn where to place our attention." Common answers may include:

- officials
- opponents
- mistakes
- playing time
- rankings
- statistics
- outside opinions
- final outcomes

Follow-up question: "How do those distractions affect performance?"

Question 2: What things actually impact our performance that we can control?

Frame the discussion: "If we cannot control everything, then where should our attention go?" Possible answers:

- preparation
- effort
- attitude
- communication
- decision-making
- discipline
- response after mistakes

Follow-up: "Which controllable has the biggest impact on our team's success?"

Question 3: Why is it tempting to focus on things outside our control?

Frame the discussion: "Sometimes worrying about uncontrollables feels easier than accepting responsibility." Discuss:

- fear of failure
- avoiding accountability
- frustration
- wanting certainty
- emotional reactions

Ask: "How does focusing on uncontrollables protect us emotionally but limit us competitively?"

Question 4: How would our team change if every athlete focused only on controllables?

Encourage athletes to imagine the ideal culture. Discuss:

- better communication
- stronger leadership
- less complaining
- greater confidence
- improved consistency

Ask: "What would other teams notice about us?"

Practice Integration

Teaching the Controllables Mindset - The goal today is to help athletes recognize where their attention goes and redirect it when necessary.

The Controllables Circle Exercise

Draw three circles on a whiteboard.

Circle 1: Control - Things we directly influence:

- effort
- attitude
- preparation
- communication
- focus
- response

Circle 2: Influence - Things we can affect but not fully control:

- teammate energy
- team chemistry
- opponent reactions
- momentum

Circle 3: Cannot Control - Things we must release:

- officials
- weather
- past mistakes
- opponent decisions
- outside opinions

Ask athletes: "Where should we spend most of our energy?"

The answer: The first circle.

Practice Challenge: Catch and Redirect - During practice, coaches and athletes identify moments when attention moves toward the uncontrollables. Examples include:

Athlete: "That was a terrible call!"

Coach: "Control?"

Athlete: "My response."

Athlete: "They are getting lucky."

Coach: "Control?"

Athlete: "Our effort and execution."

The goal is not to ignore adversity. The goal is to redirect energy toward solutions.

Leadership Challenge - Assign team leaders to watch for controllable-focused language.

Reward phrases like:

- "We need to communicate better."
- "Let's make the next play."
- "I need to adjust."
- "Let's stay focused."
- These phrases build culture.

The Paragon Challenge

Today's Challenge: Win the Energy Battle

For one practice, athletes commit to:

- No complaining about uncontrollables.
- Immediate focus on solutions.
- Positive communication.
- Full attention to the current task.

At the end of practice ask: "How much better did we compete when we controlled our energy?"

Coach's Observation Notebook

During practice, observe the following:

- **Attention**
 - Where does the team's attention naturally go?
 - Toward solutions? Or toward problems?
- **Language**
 - Listen: Negative: "The refs are terrible."
 - Positive: "Let's adjust."
- **Body Language**
 - Does frustration linger?
 - Do athletes recover quickly?
- **Leadership**
 - Who redirects teammates toward controllables?

Those athletes are developing championship leadership.

Athlete Reflection

My Controllables Reflection

1. What is one thing I spend too much energy worrying about?
2. How does that affect my performance?
3. What controllable action can replace that focus?
4. What is one controllable I will commit to improving this week?

Coach's Clipboard

Remember:

- Energy follows attention.
- Attention determines performance.
- Controllables create confidence.
- Complaining does not improve outcomes.
- Solutions create progress.

Research Into Practice

One of the most important psychological skills athletes can develop is attentional control, the ability to direct and maintain focus on information that improves performance. Under pressure, athletes often experience an increased awareness of distractions.

Their attention may shift toward:

- fear of failure,
- consequences,
- mistakes,
- evaluation by others.

Elite performers learn to redirect attention toward task-relevant information. They ask: "What does this moment require?" rather than: "What could go wrong?"

Coaches can train this skill by repeatedly bringing athletes back to controllable actions. The phrase: "**Control the controllables**" is more than a motivational statement. It is a performance strategy.

Championship Quote

"You cannot always control what goes on outside. But you can always control what goes on inside." Wayne Dyer

Champions understand that their greatest competitive advantage is not controlling circumstances. It is controlling themselves.

Championship Conversation

A championship coach once noticed his team becoming frustrated during a close game. Players were arguing about calls. They were looking at the scoreboard after every possession. They were becoming distracted by everything except the task in front of them. During a timeout, the coach simply said: "Everyone look at me. The scoreboard is not our job. The officials are not our job. The opponent is not our job. Our job is this possession."

The team returned to the court with renewed focus. They stopped fighting the game. They started playing it. They won because they redirected their energy toward what they could control.

“Coaching Matters” Connections

Continue the conversation with these Paragon Coaching Resources articles:

Performing Under Pressure: The Transformative Influence of a "Next Play" Coaching Emphasis

This article explores how athletes can maintain focus by releasing what happened and immediately returning attention to the present moment.

Thriving Under Pressure: How the Phrase "Trust Your Training" Will Shape a Winning Mentality

This article explains how preparation allows athletes to focus on execution rather than uncertainty when pressure increases.

Final Thought

Every athlete has the same amount of time, but not every athlete uses their energy the same way. Mentally tough athletes understand: They cannot control everything. They do not need to. They only need to control what belongs to them.

- Their preparation.
- Their effort.
- Their attitude.
- Their response.
- Their next action.

Championship teams are built by athletes who consistently invest their energy where it matters most.

Chapter 6

Day 3: Reset Breath

Great Athletes Recover Quickly Because They Know the Next Play Matters Most

Today's Theme - RESET BREATH

Key Principle: Mentally tough athletes do not allow one moment to control the next moment. They use a mental reset routine to release mistakes, regain focus, and compete again.

Why This Matters

Every athlete and every team will experience mistakes. Things like a missed serve, a turnover, a strikeout with runners on base, a missed assignment, a bad decision, a poor shot, or a mental lapse. Mistakes are unavoidable because competition is unpredictable. Even the greatest athletes in the world make errors under pressure.

The difference between elite performers and average performers is not whether they make mistakes. It is how quickly they recover. Many athletes understand what they should do physically after a mistake, but they struggle with the mental and emotional response. One mistake becomes two. A missed shot leads to hesitation. A bad play leads to frustration. A poor decision leads to fear of making another mistake. The athlete becomes trapped in the previous moment. Mentally tough athletes learn a different skill:

The ability to reset.

Resetting does not mean pretending the mistake did not happen. It does not mean ignoring accountability. It means acknowledging what happened, learning from it, and intentionally returning attention to the present.

The next play is always more important than the last play. Over the years, our players constantly heard the coaching staff say, “It’s all about the next play.” Soon we would hear the players say that to their teammates, especially if a teammate had just made a mistake. I’m sure this phrasing became part of a player’s “self-talk”.

The athlete who learns to reset quickly gains a tremendous competitive advantage because they are always available for the moment in front of them. Learning a mental reset routine is essential for every athlete. With that said, most athletes will need help to learn an effective mental reset routine, a strong “next play” mental reset routine, that will strengthen their resilience and mental toughness throughout an intense competition.

The Power of One Breath

A breath seems simple. But a deliberate breath can create a powerful transition. A reset breath allows athletes to:

- slow down emotional reactions,
- regain focus,
- reduce tension,
- return attention to the task,
- make a more confident decision.

The breath becomes a signal: "That moment is finished. I am ready for the next one." Great athletes do not wait until frustration disappears. They use a routine to regain control.

Coach's Locker Room

Teaching Athletes the Reset Routine

Coaching Message #1: "Mistakes Are Part of Competition"

"Everyone in this room will make mistakes. The best players in the world miss shots. The best servers in volleyball miss serves. The best golfers hit bad shots. The best quarterbacks throw interceptions. Mistakes are not the problem.

The problem is allowing one mistake to take away our ability to compete on the next play. Champions are not mistake-free. Champions recover quickly."

Coaching Message #2: "The Past Play Has No Power"

"Once a play is finished, it belongs to the past. We can learn from it. We can make adjustments. But we cannot change it. The only play we can influence is the next one.

If we spend our attention on something we cannot change, we take attention away from something we can control. The next play deserves our best focus."

Remember: "It's all about the next play."

Coaching Message #3: "Create Your Reset Routine"

"Every athlete needs a reset routine. Your routine might include: A deep breath. A positive phrase. A physical cue. A teammate connection. A simple reminder. The routine is not about forgetting. The routine is about refocusing.

When pressure arrives, we do not rise to a new level. We rely on the habits we have trained."

Team Huddle

Building a Reset Culture

Question 1: What happens when athletes do not reset after mistakes?

Frame the discussion: "One mistake is rarely the biggest problem. The bigger problem is what happens after the mistake."

Discuss:

- frustration
- loss of confidence
- negative body language
- poor communication
- additional mistakes

Ask: "How does one athlete's inability to reset affect the entire team?"

Question 2: Why is it difficult to let go of mistakes?

Frame the discussion: "Knowing what to do and actually doing it are different things."

Discuss:

- embarrassment
- perfectionism
- fear of criticism
- disappointment
- wanting to fix the mistake immediately

Ask: "What thoughts keep athletes stuck in the previous play?"

Question 3: What does elite composure look like?

Frame the discussion: "Composure does not mean athletes never feel pressure or frustration."

Discuss: A composed athlete:

- controls body language,
- communicates positively,
- stays engaged,
- trusts preparation,
- responds quickly.

Ask: "What behaviors would show that our team is composed?"

Question 4: What should our team reset phrase be?

Every mentally tough team develops shared language.

Examples: "Next play." "Flush it." "One more." "Reset." "Reload." "Trust the process." "Next ball." I coached volleyball for many years. Whenever a player was blocked, many on the team would yell, "Keep swing" to the player who had just been blocked. It was powerful.

Ask: "What phrase represents who we want to become?"

Practice Integration

Teaching the Reset Breath The goal is to make resetting automatic.

The Five-Second Reset Routine

Step 1: Breathe - Take one intentional breath. Inhale through your nose, hold it for 2 seconds. Then exhale through your mouth and pause for 2 seconds. Slow down. Repeat your breathing routine if necessary.

Step 2: Reset Your Mind - Use a short phrase. Examples: "Next play." "Next ball." "Trust my training." "Stay aggressive." Whatever the player uses, they should make it their own. Whatever works for the athlete.

Step 3: Refocus - Ask: "What does this moment require?" Return attention to the next task.

Practice Drill: Mistake Recovery

During practice, intentionally create pressure situations. Examples:

- Volleyball: A missed serve requires immediate positive communication before the next serve.
- Basketball: After a turnover, the athlete must sprint back and communicate defensively.
- Soccer: After losing possession, the athlete immediately transitions into recovery effort.
- Golf: After a poor shot, the player practices their routine before the next shot.

The goal is not to avoid mistakes. The goal is to improve the response.

Coach Challenge: Praise the Reset

Many coaches naturally praise success. Today, intentionally praise recovery. Examples: "I love how quickly you reset." "Great response after that mistake." "That is championship composure." Athletes repeat what coaches recognize.

The Paragon Challenge

Today's Challenge: One Breath. Next Play.

For today's practice, have the athletes commit to:

- Using a reset breath after mistakes.
- Eliminating negative body language.
- Encouraging teammates after adversity.
- Focusing immediately on the next responsibility.

At the end of practice ask: "How did our responses after mistakes affect our performances?"

Coach's Observation Notebook

Watch for:

- **Recovery Speed** - Who recovers quickly? Who stays frustrated?
- **Body Language** - Does an athlete's posture communicate confidence or defeat?
- **Communication** - Who helps teammates reset?
- **Leadership** - Who demonstrates composure when pressure increases?

Those athletes are building the foundation of championship leadership.

Athlete Reflection

My Reset Reflection

- What type of mistake is hardest for me to move past?
- What emotions usually follow that mistake?
- What reset routine will help me recover faster?
- What teammate can I encourage after mistakes?

Coach's Clipboard

Remember:

- Mistakes are inevitable.
- Recovery is a choice.
- One play does not define us.
- The next play deserves our attention.
- Composure is a trained skill.

Research Into Practice

One of the most important mental skills in sport performance is emotional regulation, the ability to manage emotional responses and optimally returning attention to the task. High-pressure situations often create a cycle:

Mistake → negative emotion → loss of focus → additional mistake. A reset routine interrupts that cycle. By using a deliberate breathing technique, positive self-talk, and attentional refocusing, athletes can regain control of their performance.

The key is repetition. A reset routine practiced during normal training becomes available during pressure. Coaches should not wait until a championship moment to teach composure. They should train it every day.

Great athletes do not fear mistakes. They understand mistakes are part of improvement. The difference is they refuse to stay there.

Championship Conversation

A coach once asked a struggling athlete: "What are you thinking about after you make a mistake?" The athlete answered: "I'm thinking about the mistake." The coach responded: "That is exactly why the next play is harder."

The athlete learned that the mistake itself was not the biggest obstacle. The obstacle was carrying the mistake into the future. The coach helped the athlete develop a simple routine: Take a breath. Say, "Next play." Refocus.

Over time, that simple habit changed the athlete's confidence. The athlete still made mistakes. Everyone does. But mistakes no longer controlled performance.

Coaching Matters Connections

Continue the conversation with these Paragon Coaching Resources articles:

Performing Under Pressure: The Transformative Influence of a "Next Play" Coaching Emphasis

This article explores how a next-play mindset helps athletes develop resilience, emotional control, and consistent performance under pressure.

The Winning Edge: 10 Ways Pre-Skill Mental Routines Can Transform an Athlete's Game

This article reinforces the importance of routines that prepare athletes to perform with confidence and composure.

Thriving Under Pressure: How the Phrase "Trust Your Training" Will Shape a Winning Mentality

This article explains how preparation and mental routines allow athletes to respond effectively when competition becomes stressful.

Final Thought

The best competitors are not the athletes who never experience adversity. They are the athletes who refuse to let adversity control the next moment. A mistake happened. A point was lost. A shot was missed. A decision was made.

Now comes the only question that matters: **What happens next?**

Mentally tough athletes know the answer. They breathe. They reset. They compete.

Remember: "It's all about the next ball."

Chapter 7

Day 4: Self-Talk

The Most Important Voice You Hear Is Your Own

Today's Theme - SELF-TALK

Key Principle: Mentally tough athletes understand that their internal conversation shapes their confidence, focus, and ability to perform under pressure.

Why This Matters

Every athlete talks to themselves. The question is not whether self-talk happens. The question is: **What are athletes saying to themselves?**

Before a competition, during a difficult moment, after a mistake, and when pressure increases, every athlete has an internal conversation. Some athletes become their own greatest source of confidence. Others become their own biggest obstacle. A missed shot becomes: "I always miss those." A mistake becomes: "I can't do this." A difficult opponent becomes: "This is going to be hard." Over time, those messages influence how athletes feel, think, and perform.

The human brain is constantly interpreting experiences. The words athletes use internally influence their emotions and their actions. This does not mean athletes should pretend everything is perfect. Positive self-talk is not ignoring reality. It is responding to reality in a productive way.

There is a significant difference between: "I missed that shot. I am terrible." and: "I missed that shot. I need to adjust and stay confident."

The first statement attacks identity. The second statement encourages growth. Mentally tough athletes learn to replace destructive thoughts with constructive thoughts. They become aware of their internal voice. They train their thinking the same way they train their bodies.

The Confidence Connection

Confidence is built through many sources. These sources include preparation, previous success, encouragement, experience, and overcoming challenges.

But one of the most powerful influences on confidence is self-talk. Athletes who consistently speak negatively to themselves create doubt. Athletes who learn productive

self-talk create belief. The goal is not to become unrealistically positive. The goal is to become intentionally constructive.

Championship athletes do not say: "I will never make a mistake." They say: "I know how to respond when mistakes happen." They do not say: "This pressure is too much." They say: "I have prepared for this moment." They do not say: "I hope I can do this." They say: "I trust my training."

Coach's Locker Room

Teaching Athletes to Master Their Inner Voice

Coaching Message #1: "Your Thoughts Become Your Actions"

The conversation happening inside your mind matters. If you repeatedly tell yourself that you cannot succeed, your actions will eventually follow those beliefs. If you remind yourself that you are prepared, capable, and ready to compete, your actions will reflect that confidence.

Your thoughts do not guarantee success, but they influence your preparation, effort, and response. The voice inside your head is one of your greatest teammates, or one of your greatest opponents."

Coaching Message #2: "Talk to Yourself Like You Would Talk to a Teammate"

"Think about how you encourage a teammate after a mistake. You probably would not say: 'You always mess up.' 'You are not good enough.' 'You cannot do this.' You would probably say: 'You've got this.' 'Stay aggressive.' 'Make the next play.' 'Trust yourself.' You've got this."

So why do athletes sometimes talk to themselves in ways they would never talk to someone they care about? Great competitors learn to become their own best teammate."

Coaching Message #3: "Confidence Comes From Truth"

"Positive self-talk is not pretending. It reminds you of what is true. The truth is: You have worked. You have improved. You have overcome challenges before. You have teammates who believe in you. You have coaches who have prepared you. Confidence begins when your internal voice matches the reality of your preparation."

Team Huddle

Building a Positive Self-Talk Culture

Question 1: What do athletes commonly say to themselves after mistakes?

Frame the discussion: "Many athletes would never say these things to a teammate, but they say them to themselves."

Discussion examples:

- "I always do this."
- "I can't believe I missed that."
- "I'm not good enough."
- "The coach is going to be upset."

Ask: "How do those thoughts affect the next play?"

Question 2: How can we replace negative self-talk with productive self-talk?

Explain: "The goal is not to ignore mistakes. The goal is to respond in a way that helps us improve."

Examples:

- Instead of: "I can't believe I missed."
Try: "Reset. Focus on the next opportunity."
- Instead of: "I'm nervous."
Try: "I'm prepared and ready."
- Instead of: "I can't make another mistake."
Try: "Trust my training."

Ask: "What phrases help athletes compete with confidence?"

Question 3: What type of internal voice creates confidence?

Frame the discussion: "Confidence grows when our thoughts reinforce preparation and effort." Discuss words like:

- focused,
- confident,
- aggressive,
- prepared,
- resilient.

Ask: "What would a mentally tough athlete's inner conversation sound like?"

Question 4: How can teammates influence each other's self-talk?

Frame the discussion: "Although self-talk happens internally, teammates influence the environment around each athlete."

Discuss:

- encouragement,
- positive communication,
- accountability,
- leadership.

Ask: "How can we become a team that builds confidence in others?"

Practice Integration

Teaching Productive Self-Talk - Self-talk improves when athletes intentionally practice it.

Self-Talk Awareness Exercise - During practice, have athletes notice:

Situation - What happened?

Example: "I missed a serve."

Thought - What did I say to myself?

Example: "I always miss when it matters."

Replacement Thought - What thought helps me perform?

Example: "Take a breath. Trust my routine."

This simple awareness creates change.

The Three-Word Cue - Have each athlete develop a short performance phrase.

Examples:

- Volleyball: "High hands. Trust."
- Basketball: "See. Shoot. Finish."
- Football: "Read. React. Attack."
- Golf: "Smooth. Confident. Commit."

Short phrases work best because athletes can use them under pressure:

- simple,
- positive,
- connected to the performance.

Practice Challenge: Catch the Conversation

During practice, have athletes focus on recognizing negative self-talk.

When they notice a negative thought, they must:

1. Recognize it.
2. Replace it.
3. Refocus.

The goal is not to eliminate all negative thoughts. The goal is to prevent negative thoughts from controlling performance.

The Paragon Challenge

Today's Challenge: Become Your Own Best Teammate

For today's practice, have the athletes commit to:

- No negative self-talk.
- Use constructive language after mistakes.
- Encourage teammates with confidence-building language.
- Develop one personal performance phrase.

At the end of practice ask: "Did the way we talked to ourselves change the way we competed?"

Coach's Observation Notebook

Watch for:

- **Language After Mistakes**
 - Who immediately criticizes themselves?
 - Who responds constructively?
- **Confidence Signals**
 - Who maintains positive body language?
 - Who continues competing aggressively?
- **Teammate Influence**
 - Who builds confidence in others?
 - Who creates doubt?
- **Leadership Communication**
 - Who consistently uses words that strengthen the team?
 - Those athletes are becoming culture builders.

Athlete Reflection

My Self-Talk Reflection

1. What is the most common negative thought I have during competition?
2. When does that thought usually appear?
3. What positive, realistic statement can replace it?
4. What three-word performance cue will help me compete with confidence?

Coach's Clipboard

Remember:

- Thoughts influence actions.
- Confidence begins internally.
- Positive does not mean unrealistic.
- Speak to yourself like a teammate.
- Great athletes train their minds.

Research Into Practice

Sport psychology research has consistently shown that self-talk can influence athletic performance by affecting confidence, concentration, emotional control, and motivation.

Researchers often identify two primary forms of self-talk:

Instructional Self-Talk - Used to direct performance.

Examples:

- "Follow through."
- "Stay low."
- "Watch the ball."
- "Finish the play."

Motivational Self-Talk - Used to encourage confidence and effort.

Examples:

- "I am ready."
- "I can handle this."
- "Stay strong."

Both forms can be valuable. The key is intentionality. Athletes who learn to use self-talk strategically are better prepared to manage pressure and maintain focus. Coaches can help by teaching athletes that their thoughts are not simply reactions. They are tools.

Championship Quote

"Whether you think you can, or you think you can't, you're right." - Henry Ford

Belief does not replace preparation. But preparation without belief often limits performance. Athletes must learn to trust what they have worked to become.

Championship Conversation

A coach once worked with an athlete who had tremendous ability but struggled in competition. During practice, the athlete was confident. During games, everything changed. After a mistake, the athlete's shoulders dropped. The athlete became cautious. The athlete played not to fail instead of playing to succeed.

The coach asked: "What are you saying to yourself after mistakes?" The athlete admitted: "I'm telling myself I cannot make another mistake."

The coach responded: "That thought is not helping you compete. Replace it with something that moves you forward." Together they developed a new phrase: "Trust your training." The athlete practiced using it every day. The mistakes did not disappear. But the fear did.

The athlete learned that confidence was not about avoiding mistakes. It was about trusting the ability to respond.

Coaching Matters Connections

Continue the conversation with these Paragon Coaching Resources articles:

The Confidence Conundrum: Strategies That Really Work for Coaches

This article explores how coaches can build genuine confidence in athletes through preparation, trust, and intentional development.

Words That Win: How the Pregame Coaching Talk Can Build Champions

This article examines how coaching language shapes athlete beliefs, confidence, and competitive mindset.

Performing Under Pressure: The Transformative Influence of a "Next Play" Coaching Emphasis

This article reinforces the connection between mental resets, confidence, and maintaining productive focus during competition.

Final Thought

Every athlete has a voice inside their head. That voice will speak during pressure. The question is: **Will that voice help you compete, or will it hold you back?**

Mentally tough athletes learn to control the conversation in several ways:

- They become their own best teammate.
- They choose words that create confidence.
- They choose thoughts that create action.
- They choose a mindset that allows them to compete freely.

Chapter 8

Day 5: Visualization

Great Athletes See Success Before They Experience It

Today's Theme - VISUALIZATION

Key Principle - Mentally tough athletes train their minds by creating a clear picture of successful performance before competition begins.

Why This Matters

Before an athlete performs, something important happens. They create a picture in their mind. A golfer sees the shot. A quarterback reads the defense. A volleyball player anticipates the block. A basketball player imagines the shot going through the net. A sprinter visualizes the start. Every performance begins with a thought. The best athletes understand that their minds can be trained just like their bodies.

Visualization, sometimes called mental imagery, is the process of intentionally creating a detailed mental picture of performing a skill successfully. It is one of the most widely used mental training techniques among elite performers because it allows athletes to practice beyond physical limitations.

Great athletes do not only practice what they do. They practice how they think.

The Science Behind Visualization

The brain does not completely separate imagined experiences from actual experiences. When athletes vividly imagine performing a skill, they activate many of the same mental processes involved in physical execution including focus, decision-making, confidence, emotional control, preparation, and many other important mental processes that impact performance quality.

Visualization does not replace physical practice. It enhances it. A volleyball player still needs thousands of repetitions to improve their serve. A basketball player still needs to shoot. A golfer still needs to practice. But mental rehearsal strengthens the connection between preparation and performance. The athlete begins to recognize success before it happens.

Why Visualization Builds Confidence

Confidence grows when athletes repeatedly experience successful preparation. Visualization creates another opportunity to build that confidence.

Consider the difference between these two athletes before competition:

Athlete A: "I hope I play well today."

Athlete B: "I have prepared for this moment. I have already seen myself making plays, responding to challenges, and competing with confidence."

The second athlete enters competition with a clearer picture of success. Visualization creates familiarity. The moment feels less overwhelming because the athlete's mind has already experienced it.

Coach's Locker Room

Teaching Athletes to See Success

Coaching Message #1: "Your Mind Needs Repetitions Too"

We understand that our bodies need practice. We take swings, shoot shots, and run plays. We lift weights. But your mind also needs training. Visualization gives you another opportunity to practice. Before you compete physically, compete mentally. See yourself doing what you want to do."

Coaching Message #2: "See the Process, Not Just the Outcome"

Many athletes visualize only winning. They imagine the scoreboard. They may even imagine the celebration. But championship visualization focuses on the process.

Successful visualization includes seeing yourself preparing, communicating, responding after mistakes, and making the decisions required to succeed. It's extremely important to understand that ***the outcome comes from the process***. Focusing on the process is the most important thing.

Coaching Message #3: "Create the Picture You Want to Live"

Pressure often creates negative pictures. Athletes imagine mistakes. Pressure moments often bring thoughts of possible failure. Your thoughts are filled more with what could go wrong, rather than the important mental processes necessary to execute the skills that will bring the desired success.

Great competitors intentionally create a different picture. They see good preparation and a strong mental process as the path towards a resilient confidence and inevitable success.

The picture in your mind influences the performance you create."

Team Huddle

Building a Visualization Habit

Question 1 - What do athletes usually picture before competition?

Frame the discussion: "Every athlete visualizes something. The question is whether it is intentional." **Discuss** topics like success, mistakes, pressure, opponents, expectations, etc. **Ask:** "Are the pictures in our minds helping us perform or creating doubt?"

Question 2:

Why is it easier to imagine mistakes than success?

Frame the discussion: "Negative outcomes often feel more realistic because athletes are trying to protect themselves from disappointment." **Discuss** topics like fear of failure, pressure, past mistakes, uncertainty, etc. **Ask:** "How can we train our minds to focus on preparation instead of fear?"

Question 3: What should athletes visualize before competition?

Guide athletes toward process visualization. From the following examples, ask each athlete to select however many you as the coach would like the athletes to work on. **Ask the athlete to imagine themselves**, as vividly as possible, doing the selected situation for one minute. Examples include executing skills, communicating, responding to adversity, staying composed, competing with confidence, etc.

After the minute is done, ask two questions. 1. "How vivid were you able to visualize your situation?", and 2. "Why is visualizing the process more powerful than only visualizing the result?"

Question 4: What does a mentally tough athlete's mental movie look like?

Frame the discussion: "Before every great performance, athletes create a picture of what they want to accomplish." **Ask:** "What scenes belong in our team's mental movie?" The possible answers to this question are nearly unlimited. Any possible situation that the athlete will encounter that requires mental focus can be visualized as preparation. Examples can include energy, teamwork, confidence, preparation, resilience.

Practice Integration

Teaching Visualization During Practice - Visualization should become part of normal training.

The Five-Minute Mental Rehearsal

Before practice begins, guide athletes through a short visualization. Have athletes:

1. Close their eyes.
2. Take several slow breaths.
3. Imagine entering competition.
4. See themselves performing successfully.
5. Picture responding positively to challenges.

Encourage athletes to include sights, sounds, feelings, and movements. ***The more detailed the image, the more powerful the rehearsal.***

Skill Visualization

After practicing a specific skill, have the athletes mentally repeat it. Examples include:

1. Volleyball: "See the toss. Feel the contact. Watch the serve land."
2. Basketball: "See the defender. Feel the rhythm. Watch the shot go in."
3. Golf: "See the target. Feel the swing. Watch the ball flight."

Visualization connects physical practice with mental preparation.

Pressure Visualization

Teach athletes to visualize difficulty, not just success. **Ask:** "What challenge might happen?" **Then:** "How will you respond?" Examples include:

1. "I miss my first shot."
2. "I lose the first point."
3. "The opponent scores first."
4. "I make a mistake."

The athlete practices the response. Mental toughness grows when athletes see themselves overcoming adversity.

The Paragon Challenge

Today's Challenge: Create Your Mental Movie

Before the next competition, athletes commit to:

- Spend five minutes visualizing success.
- Include preparation, execution, and response.
- See themselves handling adversity.
- Use positive, confident imagery.

At the end of the next competition, reflect: "Did my mental preparation influence my performance?"

Coach's Observation Notebook

Watch for:

- **Preparation Habits**
 - Who arrives mentally ready?
 - Who has a consistent mental and physical routine?
- **Confidence**
 - Who competes with belief?
 - Who appears uncertain?
- **Response to Pressure**
 - Who has already prepared mentally for challenges?
- **Leadership**
 - Who helps teammates prepare?

Athlete Reflection

My Visualization Reflection

1. What is the most important moment I want to visualize?
2. What details make that image realistic?
3. What challenge should I visualize overcoming?
4. What do I want to feel during competition?

Coach's Clipboard

Remember:

- See it before you do it.
- Visualization strengthens preparation.
- Picture the process, not just the result.
- Confidence grows through mental rehearsal.
- Great performances begin before competition starts.

Research Into Practice

Mental imagery has been studied extensively in sport psychology and is considered one of the most effective psychological skills training techniques. Research suggests that imagery can improve skill learning, confidence, motivation, emotional control, and performance preparation. Effective imagery includes several components:

- **Specificity** - Athletes visualize specific actions.
- **Realism** - Athletes create detailed, realistic situations.
- **Emotion** - Athletes connect with the feelings of confidence and focus.
- **Repetition** - Like physical skills, imagery improves with practice.

Coaches should teach athletes that visualization is not daydreaming. It is purposeful, intentional, and powerful mental training.

Championship Quote

"If you can see it, and believe it, you can achieve it." Zig Ziglar

Championship Conversation

A coach once worked with an athlete who struggled before important competitions. The athlete was physically prepared but mentally overwhelmed. Before every big moment, the athlete imagined things like failure, making mistakes, and disappointing his/her teammates.

The coach challenged the athlete: "What would happen if you practiced success as much as you practiced worry?" That question changed everything. The athlete began creating a mental routine. Before competition, the athlete saw things like a strong start, confident decisions, positive communication, and a strong response after mistakes.

The athlete still felt nervous. But the nervousness was different. The athlete was no longer afraid of the moment. The athlete felt much more prepared for it.

Coaching Matters Connections

Continue the conversation with these Paragon Coaching Resources articles:

Words That Win: How the Pregame Coaching Talk Can Build Champions

This article reinforces how intentional language and mental preparation shape athlete confidence before competition.

The Winning Edge: 10 Ways Pre-Skill Mental Routines Can Transform an Athlete's Game

This article explores how consistent routines prepare athletes to perform with confidence and focus.

The Confidence Conundrum: Strategies That Really Work for Coaches

This article explains how confidence is developed through preparation, successful experiences, and intentional mental habits.

Final Thought

The greatest performances are rarely created in the moment they are seen. They are created earlier through sound preparation and intentional, focused practice. Athletes who learn to visualize success give themselves another competitive advantage. The mentally tough athlete does not wait for confidence to appear. They practice confidence before competition begins. They see it, believe it, and know that they have prepared for it.

Chapter 9

Day 6: Embrace Discomfort

Growth Begins Where Comfort Ends

Today's Theme - EMBRACE DISCOMFORT

Key Principle: Mentally tough athletes do not run from discomfort—they recognize it as one of the greatest teachers on the journey toward excellence.

Why This Matters

Every athlete wants to improve, and every team wants to win. Every coach hopes to see athletes reach their full potential. But there is one challenge every athlete must eventually face: **Growth is uncomfortable.**

Learning a new skill feels awkward. Changing a habit requires discipline. Increasing strength demands physical effort. Developing confidence requires facing situations where success is uncertain. Leadership often means having difficult conversations. Mental toughness grows in exactly the same way.

Athletes become mentally stronger when they repeatedly choose growth over comfort. Unfortunately, many athletes have learned to avoid discomfort. When practice becomes difficult, they coast. When competition becomes challenging, they play cautiously. Athletes can easily become defensive when criticism is offered. When failure occurs, they withdraw.

Comfort may feel safe, but comfort rarely produces improvement. Championship athletes think differently. They understand that discomfort is often evidence that learning is taking place. Successful athletes do not enjoy every difficult moment. They simply refuse to let discomfort stop their development. Instead of asking, "**How can I avoid this?**", they ask, "**What is this teaching me?**" That simple shift in perspective changes everything.

Understanding Productive Discomfort

Not all discomfort is valuable. There is an important difference between **productive discomfort** and **harmful distress**. Productive discomfort occurs when athletes are challenged appropriately. Examples include learning a difficult new skill, competing against stronger opponents, receiving constructive coaching, conditioning that stretches current ability, accepting leadership responsibilities, recovering from mistakes, and performing under pressure. These experiences encourage growth.

Harmful distress, however, occurs when athletes experience humiliation, abuse, unrealistic expectations, or environments where fear replaces learning.

Championship coaches understand the difference. They create practices that are demanding without becoming destructive. Athletes should leave practice tired, challenged, and motivated, not fearful or defeated.

The Growth Zone

Imagine three circles.

Circle One: Comfort Zone - Everything feels familiar. Confidence is high. Learning is limited. Athletes perform what they already know. There is little challenge.

Circle Two: Growth Zone - Tasks become difficult. Mistakes increase. Learning accelerates. Confidence is tested. Improvement occurs. This is where mentally tough athletes spend most of their time.

Circle Three: Panic Zone - Challenges become overwhelming. Learning slows and anxiety increases. Athletes lose confidence. Good coaches avoid keeping athletes here.

Back in 2009, Daniel Coyle's New York Times bestseller, *The Talent Code: Greatness Isn't Born. It's Grown.*, was published. In this ground-breaking book, Coyle explains that excellence is not simply the result of natural talent. It is developed through focused, purposeful practice. Coyle emphasizes that deep practice, motivation, and the development of myelin strengthen the neural pathways that make skills faster, more precise, and more automatic, with optimal learning occurring at the **edge of failure**, where mistakes and challenges push us to adapt and improve. For athletes developing mental toughness, the message is powerful: **greatness is grown by consistently stepping outside our comfort zone, embracing challenges and mistakes, and training at the edge of failure.**

The goal is not maximum stress. The goal is **optimal challenge**. Great coaches consistently place athletes in the Growth Zone.

Coach's Locker Room

Teaching Athletes to Welcome Challenge

Coaching Message #1: "Discomfort Is a Sign You Are Improving"

Think about the last time you learned something difficult. Maybe it was driving a car. Learning algebra. Playing a musical instrument. Or mastering a new athletic skill.

At first, it probably felt uncomfortable. That discomfort wasn't evidence that you couldn't do it. It was evidence that you were learning. The same thing is true in sports. If practice always feels easy, we probably aren't growing."

Coaching Message #2: "Champions Don't Chase Easy"

The athletes who improve the fastest are not the ones who avoid challenges. They are usually the ones who intentionally seek them. Mentally tough athletes want to compete against better players. They ask for feedback. They volunteer for leadership opportunities and welcome difficult situations because they understand that today's challenge becomes tomorrow's confidence."

Coaching Message #3: "Be Comfortable Being Uncomfortable"

"You will feel nervous, feel tired, get frustrated and will experience failure. Those experiences are not signs to quit. They are invitations to grow. Every great athlete has stood exactly where you are standing. The difference is they kept moving forward."

Team Huddle

Building a Growth Mindset

Question 1: What situations make athletes uncomfortable?

Frame the discussion: "Discomfort looks different for every athlete." You can **discuss any of the following:** pressure situations, learning new skills, criticism, conditioning, leadership, fear of failure. After you've had a good discussion with your athletes, **ask:** "Which situations challenge you the most?"

Question 2: Why do athletes avoid discomfort?

Frame the discussion: "Our brains naturally prefer what feels familiar." You can **discuss any of the following:** fear of embarrassment, fear of mistakes, fear of judgment, lack of confidence, desire for immediate success. After you've had a good discussion with your athletes, **ask:** "What opportunities are missed when we avoid difficult situations?"

Question 3: Think about a time when something difficult helped you grow.

Invite athletes to share personal experiences. Examples could include overcoming an injury, making varsity, recovering from failure, learning a difficult skill, earning playing time. After you've had a good discussion with your athletes, ask: "What made that experience valuable?"

Question 4: How can our team encourage each other to embrace difficult challenges?

The discussion can include celebrating effort, encouraging persistence, giving constructive feedback, and supporting teammates after mistakes. After you've had a good discussion with your athletes, **ask**: "What kind of team culture helps athletes take healthy risks?"

Practice Integration

Teaching Athletes to Lean Into Challenge

Challenge of the Day Drill

Create one practice activity that intentionally stretches athletes beyond their comfort zone. Examples can include things like volleyball serving under pressure with consequences. Basketball could try end-of-game free throws with teammates watching. Soccer can play short-handed during small-sided games. For golf, practice difficult recovery shots rather than perfect lies.

Before beginning, tell athletes, "This drill is designed to be difficult. Your goal is not perfection. Your goal is growth."

Praise the Courage, Not Just the Outcome

Today, intentionally recognize athletes who embrace difficult situations. As the coach, you can say things like, "I love that you volunteered.", "Great job attacking that challenge.", "That mistake shows you're pushing yourself.", or "We improve because you're willing to try."

Praise courage. Confidence follows courage.

Leadership Rotation

Leadership must be intentionally developed. Give athletes opportunities to lead. Examples might include things like leading warm-ups, organizing drills, mentor younger teammates, or speaking during team discussions. Leadership itself is often uncomfortable. That is why it develops leaders.

The Paragon Challenge

Today's Challenge: Choose One Hard Thing

Every athlete chooses one challenge they would normally avoid. Examples: Speak first during discussion. Encourage a teammate. Volunteer for the difficult drill. Stay positive during conditioning. Compete against the strongest athlete. At the end of practice ask: "What happened when you leaned into discomfort instead of avoiding it?"

Coach's Observation Notebook

Watch for:

- **Risk-Taking**
 - Who willingly accepts difficult challenges?
 - Who consistently avoids them?
- **Response to Feedback**
 - Who welcomes coaching?
 - Who becomes defensive?
- **Persistence**
 - Who continues working when things become difficult?
 - Who gives up quickly?
- **Leadership**
 - Who encourages others to embrace growth?
 - Those athletes are shaping your culture.

Athlete Reflection

My Growth Reflection

1. What challenged me today?
2. How did I respond?
3. What did I learn about myself?
4. What uncomfortable situation will I intentionally embrace this week?

Coach's Clipboard

Remember:

- Growth requires challenge.
- Comfort limits improvement.
- Confidence follows courage.
- Mistakes are evidence of learning.
- Champions choose growth daily.

Research Into Practice

Sport psychology researchers have consistently found that athletes develop resilience and confidence by successfully navigating appropriately challenging experiences. This concept is closely related to **self-efficacy**, the belief that one can successfully perform a task.

Self-efficacy grows when athletes master difficult skills, overcome setbacks, receive constructive encouragement, observe teammates succeeding, reflect on personal progress. Avoiding challenge may temporarily reduce anxiety. But it also limits opportunities to build genuine confidence.

The coach's role is to create practices that stretch athletes just beyond their current abilities while providing support, instruction, and encouragement along the way. Growth happens when challenge and support work together.

Championship Quote

"Do one thing every day that scares you." Eleanor Roosevelt

Championship Conversation

A young athlete once approached a coach before practice and quietly asked, "Coach, can I avoid that drill today? I always struggle with it." The coach smiled and replied, "That may be the very reason you need to do it." The athlete reluctantly participated. It was difficult. Mistakes happened. The athlete became frustrated. But by the end of practice, something had changed.

The drill had not become easy. The athlete had become stronger. Weeks later, that same athlete volunteered to demonstrate the drill for younger teammates. The challenge had become confidence. The coach later reflected, "Growth rarely announces itself while it's happening. You usually recognize it only after you've come through it."

Coaching Matters Connections

Continue the conversation with these Paragon Coaching Resources articles:

Motivation Mistakes: Pitfalls of Using Fear and Punishment as a Coaching Method

This article explains why lasting motivation is built through purposeful challenge and encouragement rather than fear, intimidation, or punishment.

Failing Forward: Fostering a Practice Culture that Accelerates Learning and Confidence

This article explores how coaches can create learning environments where mistakes become opportunities for improvement instead of reasons for discouragement.

The Confidence Conundrum: Strategies That Really Work for Coaches

This article reinforces the relationship between challenge, preparation, successful experiences, and the development of genuine confidence.

Final Thought

Every athlete reaches moments when the easier path looks inviting. The workout becomes difficult or the drill becomes frustrating. The opponent becomes stronger. The pressure increases. In those moments, mentally tough athletes remember a simple truth: **Comfort maintains. Challenge transforms.**

Championship teams are not built because athletes avoid difficult moments. They are built because athletes repeatedly choose growth over comfort. Today, choose the harder path. One day, it will become your greatest strength.

Chapter 10

Day 7: Learn From Failure

Every Setback Holds the Seed of Future Success

Today's Theme - LEARN FROM FAILURE

Key Principle: Mentally tough athletes understand that failure is not the opposite of success. Rather, it is often the pathway to success. Every setback provides valuable information that can make us better.

Why This Matters

No athlete enjoys losing. It's hard to see a player struggle. No competitor likes making the mistake that changes the outcome of a game. Failure is disappointing because athletes care deeply about performing well. The emotional response is real, and coaches should never minimize it. However, mentally tough athletes learn that disappointment does not have to become discouragement.

One of the greatest differences between average athletes and championship athletes is not how often they fail. It is what they do after failure. Some athletes allow failure to define them. Others allow failure to develop them. Championship performers understand that every mistake answers an important question: **"What do I need to improve?"**

That answer is incredibly valuable. Each missed shot reveals something about technique. A missed assignment reveals something about preparation. Experiencing a difficult loss reveals something about teamwork. Every disappointing performance reveals something about future priorities. Failure becomes a powerful teacher when athletes are willing to become students. The goal is never to celebrate failure. Rather, the goal is to celebrate learning. When athletes understand this difference, they become more willing to take healthy risks, compete aggressively, ask questions, and continue growing even when immediate success does not come.

Ultimately, mentally tough athletes replace one question, *"Why did this happen to me?"* with a better question, **"What is this experience teaching me?"** That single change in perspective often becomes the beginning of long-term improvement.

A coach plays a critical role in creating a practice environment where athletes feel safe to take risks, make mistakes, and fail without fear of embarrassment or punishment. By treating mistakes as valuable feedback rather than failure, coaches can encourage athletes to push beyond their comfort zones, practice at the edge of their abilities, and optimize learning and improvement.

Coach's Locker Room

Teaching Athletes to Learn From Failure

Coaching Message #1: "Failure Is Information"

"Every practice and every competition gives us feedback. Sometimes that feedback feels encouraging. Other times it is disappointing. Either way, it tells us something important. If we listen carefully, our mistakes often become our greatest teachers."

Coaching Message #2: "Separate Performance From Identity"

"You may have played poorly today. That does not mean you are a poor athlete. You may have made a mistake. That does not make you a failure. One performance never defines who you are. Your character is revealed by how you respond after difficult days."

Coaching Message #3: "Respond Like a Champion"

"When something doesn't go your way, remember that every athlete faces setbacks. The question is not whether adversity will come. The more important question is whether you will use it as an excuse to stop growing or as motivation to become better. **Championship athletes always choose growth.**"

Team Huddle

Building a Team That Learns From Setbacks

Question 1: What is the biggest lesson failure can teach an athlete?

Frame the discussion: "Failure can be painful, but it can also reveal opportunities that success sometimes hides."

Ask: What have you learned from losing? What have your mistakes taught you? How have setbacks made you stronger?

Question 2: Think about a time you improved because something was difficult.

Encourage athletes to reflect on experiences such as:

- learning a challenging skill,
- recovering from an injury,
- earning playing time,
- overcoming disappointment,
- working through frustration.

Ask: "What would you have missed if everything had been easy?"

Question 3: How should teammates respond when someone makes a mistake?

Frame the discussion: "Our response to another person's failure helps define our team culture."

Discuss important things like:

- encouragement,
- accountability,
- constructive feedback,
- patience,
- leadership.

Ask: "What kind of teammate helps others grow?"

Question 4: What habits help athletes recover from failure more quickly?

Possible discussion points include:

- accepting responsibility,
- asking for feedback,
- maintaining confidence,
- trusting preparation,
- returning to work.

Finish by asking questions like: "Which of these habits do we need to improve as a team?"

How can we improve each of these habits as a team? As teammates?

Practice Integration

Turning Mistakes Into Learning Opportunities

Today's goal is to help athletes respond constructively after every mistake.

The Learn–Adjust–Repeat Routine

Whenever an athlete makes an error:

Step 1 — Learn - "What happened?" Describe the play objectively. Avoid blame. Avoid excuses.

Step 2 — Adjust - "What can I do differently next time?" Identify one specific improvement. Keep it simple.

Step 3 — Repeat - Immediately practice the adjustment. Do not wait until tomorrow. Learning becomes permanent through repetition.

Celebrate Adjustments

Today, recognize athletes who make successful adjustments, not just athletes who succeed immediately. Use comments such as:

- "I like the adjustment you made."
- "Great job learning from the previous rep."
- "That response shows maturity."

These statements reinforce that improvement matters as much as performance.

End-of-Practice Learning Circle

Invite every athlete to complete one sentence: **"Today I learned..."** This simple habit helps athletes leave practice focused on growth rather than perfection.

The Paragon Challenge

Today's Challenge: Find the Lesson

During today's practice, every athlete commits to:

- Accept mistakes without making excuses.
- Ask, "What can I learn?"
- Make one adjustment after every mistake.
- Encourage one teammate who is working through a difficult moment.

At the end of practice ask: "What was the most valuable lesson you learned today?"

Coach's Observation Notebook

Watch for:

- **Coachability**
 - Who welcomes instruction?
 - Who asks thoughtful questions?
 - Who applies feedback immediately?
- **Emotional Response**
 - Who stays engaged after mistakes?
 - Who becomes discouraged?
 - Who recovers quickly?
- **Adjustment**
 - Who changes behavior after feedback?
 - Who repeats the same habits?

- **Leadership**
 - Who encourages teammates after setbacks?
 - Who helps create a learning environment?
 - Those athletes are becoming culture builders.

Athlete Reflection

My Learning Reflection

1. What mistake taught me the most today?
2. What did I learn from that experience?
3. What adjustment will I make next practice?
4. How has today's challenge made me a better competitor?

Coach's Clipboard

Remember:

- Mistakes are information.
- Learning creates improvement.
- Improvement builds confidence.
- Responding well matters more than reacting emotionally.
- Every setback contains a lesson.

Research Into Practice

Studies in sport psychology consistently show that athletes improve more rapidly when they view mistakes as opportunities to learn rather than as evidence that they lack ability. Coaches play a significant role in shaping this mindset. The language used after mistakes influences how athletes interpret setbacks.

Questions such as the following encourage reflection and problem-solving:

- "What did you notice?"
- "What adjustment will help?"
- "What did this experience teach you?"

Over time, athletes begin asking those questions on their own. That is when learning becomes self-directed and resilience begins to flourish.

Championship Quote

"Success is a journey of continual learning, improvement, and perseverance."

Championship athletes understand that growth rarely follows a straight line. Progress often includes setbacks, adjustments, and renewed commitment.

Championship Conversation

During one practice, a young athlete struggled with the same skill repeatedly. Frustration became visible, and confidence began to fade. The coach walked over and asked, "What have you learned from the last three attempts?" The athlete paused before answering. "I've learned what doesn't work."

The coach smiled. "That's progress. Now let's figure out what does work." The next few repetitions weren't perfect, but they were better.

Weeks later, that athlete reflected on the experience and said, "I stopped being afraid of making mistakes because I realized every mistake could teach me something." That change in thinking became a turning point, not only in athletic performance, but in confidence.

Coaching Matters Connections

Continue the conversation with these **Coaching Matters** articles:

[Failing Forward: Fostering a Practice Culture that Accelerates Learning and Confidence](#)

Explore practical ways to create a practice environment where mistakes become stepping stones rather than stumbling blocks.

[Coaching Without Regret: Avoiding Common Coaching Regrets and Learning from Mistakes](#)

Learn how coaches can model humility, accountability, and continuous improvement while helping athletes do the same.

[The Confidence-Motivation Loop: Building Belief That Fuels Performance](#)

Confidence and motivation exist in a powerful cycle. When athletes feel confident, they are more willing to train, compete, and stretch themselves. That effort leads to improvement, which strengthens confidence even more. Great coaches don't leave this to chance. They intentionally build confidence in ways that ignite and sustain motivation.

Final Thought

Every championship athlete has experienced disappointment. Every successful coach has endured difficult seasons. Every great team has faced setbacks. The difference is not the absence of failure. The difference is the decision to keep learning. When athletes understand that every setback offers an opportunity to improve, failure loses its power to define them. Instead, it becomes one more step on the journey toward excellence.

Chapter 11

Day 8: Next Play

Championship Teams Win the Moment They Are In

Today's Theme - NEXT PLAY

Key Principle: Mentally tough teams refuse to let one moment determine the next. They quickly reset, refocus, and give their full attention to the opportunity directly in front of them.

Why This Matters

Every competition is filled with moments that test an athlete's mindset. Things like a missed free throw, a dropped pass, a double fault, a missed putt, a turnover, or a strikeout will happen to everyone, regardless of skill level. It might be a poor call by an official or a teammate's mistake. These moments are inevitable, but what separates mentally tough athletes is not whether mistakes or adversity occur, but how quickly and effectively they respond to what happens next.

How quickly can you move forward?

Earlier in this challenge, you learned the importance of using a reset breath to regain emotional control after a mistake. That was an individual mental skill. It's a very effective way to calm your mind and prepare for the next opportunity.

Today's challenge builds on that foundation. The **Next Play** team mindset is about creating a team culture where every athlete understands that the most important play in the game is always the one that is about to happen. Championship teams have short memories when it comes to mistakes and long memories when it comes to lessons. They acknowledge what happened and make any necessary adjustment. Then they immediately return their attention to the present.

Average teams allow one mistake to become two. Frustration leads to hesitation. Hesitation leads to poor decisions. Poor decisions lead to additional mistakes. The cycle continues. Mentally tough teams interrupt that cycle. They refuse to let yesterday's play steal today's opportunity. Every "next play" is a fresh beginning.

Living in the Present

One of the greatest challenges in competition is staying mentally present. Athletes often drift in one of two directions. Some live in the past. They replay mistakes. They dwell on missed opportunities and criticize themselves for what cannot be changed.

Others jump into the future. They worry about the final score and think about consequences. They imagine what might happen if they fail. I've heard this referred to by some sports psychologists as "Time Traveling". Neither mindset helps performance.

Championship athletes compete in the present. They ask one simple question:

"What does this moment require?"

That question keeps their attention exactly where it belongs.

Coach's Locker Room

Teaching the Next Play Mindset

Coaching Message #1: "Every Play Is a New Beginning"

"Competition gives us dozens, sometimes hundreds of opportunities to make a choice. We can carry frustration into the next play. Or we can begin again. Championship athletes understand that every play deserves a fresh start. The last play is over. This next one belongs to you."

Coaching Message #2: "The Team Takes Its Emotional Cue From You"

"Whether you're a captain or a first-year player, your teammates notice how you respond after adversity. When you recover quickly, you give others permission to do the same. When you stay positive, your confidence becomes contagious. Leadership often begins with emotional consistency."

Coaching Message #3: "Win This Moment"

"You don't have to win the entire game right now. You only have to win this moment. An example might be in the sport of volleyball. There are about 15 seconds between plays... end of the play to the initiation of serve for the next play. The phrase, "Win-the-15" is a powerful mental, "Next Play" reset that can be helpful for athletes to mentally be ready for the next play. This type of mental cue allows you to focus on your assignment, trust your preparation, do your job well, then move on to the next opportunity."

Coaching Message #4: Allowing Your Athletes to Mentally Reset for the Next Play

"How well do we as coaches teach/coach a "Next Play" mental approach? "Coaches tend to be reactive to the last thing that just happened. It's easy to be reactive to what just happened. That works directly against the idea of doing a little analysis or flushing the previous play and coming fresh to the next play. If you're teaching it, then you also have to do it. ...it's a problem for coaches if they say, "next play", and then they're yelling at the player for the mistake they've just made."

Team Huddle

Building a Next Play Culture

Question 1: Why do athletes sometimes dwell on mistakes?

Frame the discussion: "Mistakes become bigger when we continue replaying them in our minds."

Encourage athletes to reflect on the following mental processes:

- embarrassment,
- perfectionism,
- fear of disappointing teammates,
- frustration,
- loss of confidence.

Ask: "How does dwelling on mistakes affect the next play?"

Question 2: What does a 'Next Play' athlete look like?

Encourage athletes to identify observable behaviors. Discuss important things like:

- positive body language,
- immediate communication,
- focused attention,
- hustle,
- confidence,
- resilience.

Ask: "What would an opponent notice about an athlete who has mastered the Next Play mindset?"

Question 3: How can teammates help each other move on?

Frame the discussion: "Mental toughness is both personal and contagious." Discuss important things like:

- encouraging words,
- eye contact,
- high-fives,
- quick reminders,
- positive communication, leadership.

Ask: "What simple habits can we develop to help each other reset faster?"

Question 4: If our team truly lived the Next Play mindset, what would change?

Discuss important things like:

- fewer emotional swings,
- greater consistency,
- stronger communication,
- increased confidence,
- better finishes,
- improved resilience.

Finish by asking: "What is one habit we can begin today that supports this culture?"

Practice Integration

Teaching the Next Play Habit

Today's goal is to connect individual recovery with team performance.

The Five-Second Rule

Whenever something negative happens during practice:

- Take one deep breath.
- Accept what happened.
- Make one adjustment.
- Rejoin the team.
- Fully engage within five seconds.

The purpose is to help each athlete to create/develop their own unique mental reset process. It's not to rush emotions. The purpose is to prevent emotions from controlling future performance. A powerful mental reset process allows for a strong "Next Play" mindset.

Team Reset Drill

Throughout practice, intentionally stop drills after mistakes. Ask the team: "What is the next play?" Do not discuss the previous mistake. Immediately restart the drill. Athletes begin learning that recovery is part of performance.

Reset Partner

Assign every athlete a partner. After difficult moments, partners simply say one phrase: "Next play." No lectures. No criticism. Just a reminder to move forward together. This creates shared accountability and strengthens team chemistry.

The Paragon Challenge

Today's Challenge: Own the Next Moment

Throughout today's practice, every athlete commits to:

- Let go of mistakes quickly.
- Stay fully engaged after every play.
- Encourage one teammate to move forward.
- Focus on the present rather than the scoreboard.

At the end of practice ask: "How did focusing on the next play improve our team today?"

Coach's Observation Notebook

Watch for:

- **Recovery Time**
 - Who immediately re-engages after adversity?
 - Who lingers emotionally?
- **Team Communication**
 - Who encourages others?
 - Who redirects attention toward the present?
- **Body Language**
 - Who demonstrates confidence after mistakes?
 - Who allows frustration to become visible?
- **Leadership**
 - Who naturally reminds teammates to move forward?
 - Those athletes are helping build a mentally tough culture.

Athlete Reflection

My Next Play Reflection

1. What situation is hardest for me to let go of?
2. How quickly did I recover today?
3. Who helped me stay focused?
4. What will I do differently the next time adversity strikes?

Coach's Clipboard

Remember:

- Every play is a fresh opportunity.
- The past cannot be changed.
- The present deserves your attention.
- Recovery is a skill.
- Championship teams move forward together.

Research Into Practice

Performance psychologists often describe elite competitors as having exceptional **attentional control**. This is the ability to direct attention to what matters most in the present moment. When athletes dwell on previous mistakes or worry about future outcomes, attention shifts away from the task at hand.

Intentional reset routines, supportive teammate communication, and present-focused cue words help athletes quickly redirect their attention. Coaches reinforce this skill by consistently emphasizing process over outcome and by rewarding athletes who demonstrate resilience after adversity.

The vast majority of athletes strongly prefer to be coached during competition in a “Next Play” coaching style. Several years ago, I described a “Last Play” coaching style and a “Next Play” coaching style to our team. I was curious what their response might be. I was quite impressed with two things: 1. the level of maturity and insight in their responses, and 2, how strongly they felt about each coaching style. They understood that it was important to coach in a “Last Play” kind of style when doing small group or individual teaching. But they were very clear that if the team was competing, they wanted a “Next Play” kind of coaching style. One athlete summed it up really well by saying, “Don’t tell me what I just did. Tell me what I need to do.” They also wanted the coaches to help them to learn strong “Next Play” mental reset techniques and routines.

Over time, the ability to move confidently from one play to the next becomes part of a team's competitive identity.

Championship Quote

"The next opportunity is always more important than the last mistake."

Championship teams understand that every competition offers another chance to respond well. The athletes who consistently embrace that opportunity often discover that resilience becomes one of their greatest competitive advantages.

Championship Conversation

Late in a championship game, a team captain made an uncharacteristic error that allowed the opponent to tie the score. For a brief moment, disappointment appeared on the captain's face. Then something remarkable happened. A teammate walked over, smiled, and quietly said, "Next play." The captain nodded.

On the very next possession, the team communicated better, executed with confidence, and regained the lead. After the game, the coach reflected, "The mistake didn't decide the game. Our response did."

That became one of the team's defining lessons. Great teams are not remembered because they never make mistakes. They are remembered because they never allow mistakes to define them.

Coaching Matters Connections

Continue the conversation with these **Coaching Matters** articles:

[Performing Under Pressure: The Transformative Influence of a "Next Play" Coaching Emphasis](#)

Learn practical strategies for helping athletes reset quickly, stay emotionally composed, and compete with confidence after adversity.

[Thriving Under Pressure: How the Phrase "Trust Your Training" Will Shape a Winning Mentality](#)

Discover how preparation and present-focused thinking allow athletes to perform with confidence when pressure is greatest.

[The Language of Victory: How Great Teams Communicate Better](#)

Explore how positive, intentional communication strengthens resilience, builds trust, and creates a team culture that responds well to adversity.

Final Thought

Every game includes moments you wish you could replay and every athlete experiences disappointment. Every team faces adversity. Championship teams are not defined by those moments. They are defined by what happens immediately afterward.

Mentally tough athletes understand that every whistle, every point, every possession, and every play offers a new beginning. The past has already done its work and the future has not yet arrived. The only place you can compete is right here. **The next play is waiting.**

Chapter 12

Day 9: Compete With Intent

Great Athletes Never Leave Their Effort to Chance

Today's Theme - **COMPETE WITH INTENT**

Key Principle: Mentally tough athletes understand that effort is not an emotion. It is a decision. Every practice, every repetition, and every competition presents an opportunity to choose purposeful effort.

Why This Matters

Most athletes say they want to win. They want to improve, and they dream of becoming the best they can be. But the difference is not found in what athletes want; **it is found in how they compete every day.**

Championship athletes do not simply participate in practice. **They practice with purpose.** Rather than going through the motions, they attack each repetition with intention. They understand that excellence is rarely built during the championship game. **It is built on ordinary Tuesday afternoons, during conditioning, in warm-ups, and through drills that no one remembers but everyone benefits from later.**

Purposeful effort means more than simply working hard. It means understanding **why** you are doing what you are doing. Working hard while practicing poor habits can actually reinforce those habits, while focused practice with attention to detail and a commitment to deliberate improvement accelerates development.

Throughout practice, mentally tough athletes continually ask themselves: *"What am I trying to improve right now?"* That simple question can transform an ordinary practice into **intentional practice.**

Intent Creates Excellence

There is an important difference between activity and progress. Athletes can spend two hours practicing without truly improving. They can complete every drill while allowing their minds to drift. They can repeat mistakes without making adjustments. "Mindless repetitions" do little to actually learn something. If repetitions were the key, then why wouldn't your handwriting become more legible. Think about that. Over the years I would use the "Handwriting" illustration with our players to encourage "mindful" practice habits. If I sensed that a player or players were not as "mindful" as they needed to be, I'd just need to use the cue word, "Handwriting" to encourage a re-focus. It was very effective.

Purposeful competitors refuse to practice on autopilot. Instead, they approach every repetition with three commitments: **Give my best effort. Focus on improvement. Finish the rep well.** When athletes consistently combine effort with intention, improvement accelerates. Every repetition becomes an investment in future performance.

Competing Beyond the Scoreboard

Many athletes judge themselves primarily by outcomes: **Did we win? Did I score? Did I start?** Those questions certainly matter, but they are incomplete.

Mentally tough athletes also evaluate themselves by the things they can control. **Did I communicate? Did I stay focused? Did I encourage my teammates? Did I execute the coaching point? Did I compete with purpose?**

These questions remain valuable regardless of whether the team wins or loses. **Over time, consistently mastering controllable behaviors creates the habits and confidence that often lead to better outcomes.**

Coach's Locker Room

Teaching Athletes to Compete With Purpose

Coaching Message #1: "Choose Your Effort"

"Every day you make hundreds of decisions. One of the most important is how hard you choose to compete. No coach can make that decision for you. No teammate can make it. Effort is one of the few things every athlete controls completely. Championship athletes choose maximum effort before practice even begins."

Coaching Message #2: "Practice Like It Matters"

"Every drill teaches something. Every repetition builds a habit. If you practice casually, casual habits become automatic. There is a lot of truth to the old coaching adage, 'We will play the way we practice.' If you practice with focus, disciplined habits become automatic. Practice is not preparation for competition. Practice is part of competition."

Coaching Message #3: "Compete Against Yesterday"

"It is easy to compare yourself to other athletes. But your greatest competition is often the person you were yesterday. Ask yourself: 'Am I improving?' 'Am I becoming more disciplined?' 'Am I giving my team my best?' That is the competition that never ends."

Team Huddle

Building an Intentional Team Culture

Question 1: What does it mean to compete with intent?

Frame the discussion: "Working hard and competing with purpose are closely related, but they are not always the same."

Possible discussion topics:

- focus,
- discipline,
- preparation,
- attention to detail,
- consistency.

Ask: "What behaviors show that an athlete is competing intentionally?"

Question 2: What causes athletes to lose focus during practice?

Possible discussion topics:

- boredom,
- distractions,
- fatigue,
- routine,
- lack of purpose.

Ask: "How can we stay mentally engaged even during ordinary drills?"

Question 3: How does one athlete's effort influence the entire team?

Frame the discussion: "Effort is contagious."

Possible discussion topics:

- energy,
- accountability,
- communication,
- leadership,
- expectations.

Ask: "What happens when everyone competes with purpose?"

Question 4: What standard do we want to establish for our team?

Invite athletes to help define the team's competitive identity. Possible standards include:

- finish every drill,
- communicate consistently,
- hustle between reps,
- encourage teammates,
- stay mentally engaged.

Ask: "Which standard will make the biggest difference for us?"

Practice Integration

Training Intentional Competition - Today's practice emphasizes quality over quantity.

Every Rep Has a Purpose - Before each drill, ask athletes: "What is today's coaching point?" Have athletes answer before beginning. This simple question focuses attention. When athletes know the purpose of the drill, they perform with greater intention.

Finish Every Rep - Challenge athletes to complete every repetition with full concentration. No jogging after the whistle. No relaxing before the drill ends. No assuming the rep is over until it truly is. Championship habits include championship finishes.

Intentional Communication - During practice, require athletes to communicate during every drill. Purposeful communication keeps athletes mentally engaged and reinforces teamwork. Energy and focus often rise together.

The Paragon Challenge

Today's Challenge: Win Every Rep

Throughout today's practice, every athlete commits to:

- Know the purpose of every drill.
- Give complete effort on every repetition.
- Stay mentally engaged from beginning to end.
- Encourage teammates to compete with purpose.

At the end of practice ask: "Did we simply complete practice today, or did we compete throughout practice?" "Did we get better?"

Coach's Observation Notebook

Watch for:

- **Focus**
 - Who remains mentally engaged throughout practice?
 - Who drifts during routine drills?
- **Effort**
 - Who consistently gives maximum effort?
 - Who competes hardest when no one is watching?
- **Consistency**
 - Who maintains the same standard regardless of the drill?
- **Leadership**
 - Who raises the competitive level of teammates through their example?
 - Those athletes are helping define your culture.

Athlete Reflection

My Intent Reflection

1. When was I most focused today?
2. When did my effort begin to fade?
3. What helped me stay engaged?
4. What will I intentionally improve during my next practice?

Coach's Clipboard

Remember:

- Effort is a choice.
- Focus creates improvement.
- Every repetition builds habits.
- Practice with purpose.
- Excellence is built one rep at a time.

Research Into Practice

Research on expert performance consistently highlights the value of **deliberate practice** which is practice that is purposeful, focused, and designed to improve specific aspects of performance. Simply repeating a skill is not enough. Remember the term, “Mindless Repetitions” mentioned earlier in this chapter. By practicing with focused attention, immediate feedback, and a willingness to work at the edge of their abilities, athletes turn each repetition into an opportunity to become better.

Athletes improve most when they:

- understand the objective,
- receive meaningful feedback,
- make adjustments,
- remain mentally engaged.

Coaches play an important role by clearly communicating the purpose of each activity and encouraging athletes to pursue improvement rather than merely completing repetitions. When athletes understand *why* they are practicing a skill, motivation and concentration often increase.

Championship Quote

"Excellence is built one intentional choice at a time."

Outstanding performances are rarely accidents. They are usually the result of thousands of purposeful decisions made long before game day.

Championship Conversation

A veteran coach once stopped practice after watching a drill that looked technically correct but lacked energy. The athletes had completed every repetition. But something was missing. The coach gathered the team and asked, "Did you finish the drill, or did you compete in the drill?"

The players looked at one another. They understood the difference. The next time the drill began, communication increased. Movement became sharper. Attention improved. The drill itself had not changed. The athletes had.

From that day forward, the team adopted a simple reminder: **"Don't just do the drill. Compete in the drill."** That mindset eventually became one of the defining characteristics of their program.

Coaching Matters Connections

Continue the conversation with these **Coaching Matters** articles:

Players Will Do What You Train Them To Do

Discover how daily practice habits shape competitive behaviors and why coaches must intentionally train the standards they expect to see on game day.

Finishing Strong: Lessons from Competitive Sport and Life

Learn why sustained effort, disciplined habits, and commitment to the process often determine long-term success.

The Confidence Conundrum: Strategies That Really Work for Coaches

Explore how confidence grows when athletes consistently prepare, compete with purpose, and experience meaningful improvement.

Final Thought

Championship performances rarely begin under the bright lights. They begin in quiet gyms. On empty practice fields. On early mornings. During routine drills. They begin when athletes make a decision. Not simply to participate. Not simply to finish. But to compete with purpose.

Every repetition matters. Every choice matters. Every day is an opportunity to become the athlete and teammate you hope to become. Compete today with the same intensity you hope to display on championship day. Your future performance is being built one intentional rep at a time.

Chapter 13

Day 10: Team Energy

The Attitude You Bring Becomes Part of Your Team's Culture

Today's Theme - TEAM ENERGY

Key Principle: Mentally tough teams understand that every athlete influences the emotional climate of the team. Positive energy is not an accident. It is a daily choice that strengthens performance, relationships, and resilience.

Why This Matters

Walk into any locker room before a competition, and you will notice something immediately: **every team has an atmosphere.** Confidence may fill one locker room, while another feels anxious. Some teams enter competition connected and unified; others arrive divided.

Where does that atmosphere come from? It isn't created by one speech, determined by the scoreboard, or reserved for team captains and coaches. **A team's emotional climate is built through the attitudes, actions, and interactions of every athlete.**

Every player contributes something to the environment. Encouragement, confidence, enthusiasm, and calm under pressure can elevate an entire team. Frustration, negativity, or doubt can have the opposite effect, often spreading unintentionally from one athlete to another.

The important question isn't whether you influence your team. **You do.** The real question is: **What are you contributing?**

Mentally tough athletes understand that energy is contagious. A positive attitude can lift a teammate after a mistake, while focused body language can restore confidence during difficult moments. Sometimes, a simple word of encouragement is enough to change the direction of an entire practice or competition.

Championship teams understand that energy is part of performance. When athletes consistently bring positive, purposeful energy to the team, they help create an environment where everyone has a greater opportunity to succeed.

Energy Is More Than Excitement - When people hear the word “**energy**,” they often picture loud voices, enthusiastic celebrations, and high emotion. Those things can certainly contribute to a team’s spirit, but **championship energy is much broader than that.**

At times, the best energy is calm confidence. In other moments, it may be quiet encouragement, relentless effort, or simply choosing optimism when circumstances become difficult. **Positive energy is not about pretending everything is perfect; it is about choosing responses that move the team forward.**

Circumstances will not always be within an athlete's control. **The response always is.** Championship athletes understand that while they cannot control everything that happens around them, they can always influence how they respond and that response can positively impact the entire team.

Coach's Locker Room

Teaching Athletes to Become Energy Builders

Coaching Message #1: "Everyone Is a Thermostat"

"Think about the difference between a thermometer and a thermostat. A thermometer simply reports the temperature. A thermostat changes it. Some athletes simply react to whatever is happening around them. Others intentionally improve the environment. Championship athletes become thermostats. They raise the standard wherever they go."

Coaching Message #2: "Body Language Speaks First"

"Long before you say a word, your teammates notice your body language. Do you walk confidently? Do you encourage others after mistakes? Do you compete with enthusiasm? Your actions communicate just as loudly as your words. Choose body language that gives confidence to your teammates."

Coaching Message #3: "Leave People Better"

"One of the greatest gifts you can give a teammate is encouragement. Your words may help someone regain confidence. Your smile may reduce someone's anxiety. Your belief may help someone keep competing. Every practice gives you opportunities to leave people better than you found them."

Coaching Message #4: "Choose Your Energy"

"Every day, you have a choice about the energy you bring to your team. You can react to frustration, mistakes, and adversity, or you can choose to bring confidence, encouragement, focus, and effort. Mentally tough athletes don't wait for someone else to create positive energy; they choose to be the source of it. Be the teammate who makes the team better simply by being there."

Team Huddle

Building a Positive Team Environment

Question 1: What kinds of energy help a team perform well?

Frame the discussion: "Not every athlete shows energy the same way."

Discussion examples:

- enthusiasm,
- confidence,
- calmness,
- encouragement,
- determination,
- resilience.

Ask: "What kinds of energy help our team the most?"

Question 2: How does negative energy spread through a team?

Discussion examples:

- complaining,
- blaming,
- poor body language,
- frustration,
- discouragement,
- lack of effort.

Ask: "What happens when one person's attitude affects everyone else?"

Question 3: Think about a teammate who made you better simply through their attitude.

Invite athletes to reflect on:

- encouragement,
- leadership,
- optimism,
- consistency,
- work ethic.

Ask: "What did that person do that made such a difference?"

Question 4:

What kind of energy do we want our team to be known for?

Encourage athletes to identify characteristics such as:

- resilience,
- joy,
- discipline,
- positivity,
- confidence,
- unity.

Finish by asking: "If another team watched our practice today, what kind of energy would they see?"

Practice Integration

Creating Positive Energy Habits - Today's challenge focuses on intentional encouragement.

The Three Encouragement Rule - Every athlete intentionally encourages at least three different teammates during practice. The encouragement should be specific, sincere, and timely.

Examples include:

- "Great adjustment."
- "I love your effort."
- "Keep attacking."
- "You've got the next one."

Specific encouragement has greater impact than general praise.

Energy Check - Pause practice briefly several times. Ask: "How is our team energy right now?" Allow athletes to evaluate themselves. Then ask: "What can we do over the next five minutes to raise our standard?" Ownership creates accountability.

Celebrate Team Success - Whenever one athlete experiences success, encourage teammates to celebrate together. This reinforces the idea that one person's success contributes to the success of the entire team. Championship cultures replace jealousy with shared celebration.

The Paragon Challenge

Today's Challenge: Be an Energy Builder

Throughout today's practice, every athlete commits to:

- Encourage at least three teammates.
- Display positive body language.
- Respond positively after mistakes.
- Help create an atmosphere where others can succeed.

At the end of practice ask: "How did your attitude influence someone else today?"

Coach's Observation Notebook

Watch for:

- **Communication**
 - Who consistently encourages teammates?
 - Who communicates positively during adversity?
- **Body Language**
 - Who demonstrates confidence and resilience?
 - Who unintentionally spreads frustration?
- **Team Influence**
 - Who naturally raises the emotional level of the team?
 - Who helps teammates recover after mistakes?
- **Leadership**
 - Who consistently puts the needs of the team ahead of personal emotions?
 - Those athletes are becoming culture builders.

Athlete Reflection

My Energy Reflection

1. What kind of energy did I bring to practice today?
2. How did I encourage my teammates?
3. When did my attitude positively influence someone else?
4. What energy do I want to consistently bring to our team?

Coach's Clipboard

Remember:

- Energy is contagious.
- Attitude influences performance.
- Body language communicates constantly.
- Encouragement strengthens confidence.
- Every athlete shapes team culture.

Research Into Practice

Research on team dynamics consistently shows that emotions spread throughout groups. Sport psychologists often refer to this as **emotional contagion**, the tendency for individuals to influence one another's emotional states through words, body language, and behavior. Positive communication has been associated with greater team cohesion, increased confidence, and improved resilience during adversity.

Coaches can strengthen positive emotional climates by intentionally recognizing encouragement, celebrating unselfish behavior, and reinforcing communication that supports teammates. Athletes who understand that their attitudes affect others become more intentional about the emotional environment they help create.

Championship Quote

"The strongest teams are built by athletes who consistently make the people around them better."

Championship cultures are created one interaction at a time.

Championship Conversation

During a difficult stretch of the season, one team found itself struggling through several close losses. The coaches noticed something interesting. Practices remained disciplined. Skills continued improving. But the team's emotional energy had quietly changed. Communication became quieter. Encouragement became less frequent. Mistakes were followed by silence instead of support.

At the next practice, the coaching staff introduced one simple challenge. "Today, your goal is not only to improve yourself. Your goal is to help someone else have a better practice."

Something shifted. Athletes encouraged one another more often. They celebrated effort. They communicated with greater purpose.

By the end of practice, the atmosphere felt noticeably different. Nothing about the drills had changed. The people had. The team rediscovered an important truth: Positive energy does not appear by chance. It is created through intentional choices made every day.

Coaching Matters Connections

Continue the conversation with these **Coaching Matters** articles:

The Language of Victory: How Great Teams Communicate Better

Discover how intentional communication strengthens trust, improves teamwork, and creates a culture where athletes consistently support one another.

Players Will Do What You Train Them To Do

Learn how coaches establish daily behavioral standards that eventually become the culture and identity of their teams.

Motivating Student-Athletes Through the Long Season

Explore practical strategies for maintaining enthusiasm, purpose, and commitment throughout the inevitable highs and lows of a competitive season.

Final Thought

Every athlete leaves something behind after every practice. Sometimes it is encouragement. Sometimes it is confidence. Sometimes it is enthusiasm. Sometimes it is doubt. The choice belongs to each athlete.

Championship teams are built by individuals who understand that their influence extends far beyond their own performance. They choose words that strengthen. They choose attitudes that inspire. They choose actions that unite.

They recognize that culture is created one conversation, one response, one act of encouragement, and one practice at a time. Today, choose to be the teammate whose presence makes everyone around you better.

Chapter 14

Day 11: Handle Pressure

Pressure Reveals What Preparation Has Built

Today's Theme - HANDLE PRESSURE

Key Principle: Mentally tough athletes do not fear pressure. They prepare for it, embrace it, and trust the habits they have developed through consistent practice.

Why This Matters

Every athlete eventually faces pressure. A tied score, a roaring crowd, a winding clock, or a championship within reach can suddenly make every moment feel more significant. The final putt matters. So does the free throw, the serve, or the final possession.

In those moments, athletes often view pressure as the enemy. **It isn't.** Pressure simply magnifies what already exists. The US Navy SEALs will say, “Under pressure you don’t rise to the occasion, you fall to your level of training.” Performance psychology will tell you that the greater the pressure, the more you go towards your best learned response.

When preparation has been built through discipline and purposeful practice, pressure provides an opportunity to demonstrate that preparation. Athletes who have relied primarily on talent, however, may discover that pressure exposes weaknesses in their habits and preparation.

Pressure is not reserved for championship games. **It can show up every day.** It will show up during a tryout, while returning from an injury, when starting for the first time, before taking a difficult exam, while speaking in front of teammates, or when being asked to lead.

At its simplest, pressure is the feeling that something important is happening. The goal, therefore, is not to eliminate pressure but to **perform well while experiencing it.**

Championship athletes understand that nervousness is normal. Butterflies in the stomach, an elevated heart rate, sweaty palms, and heightened alertness are all natural responses to a meaningful moment. **Those physical sensations do not mean you are unprepared; they mean you care about the outcome and your body is preparing you to perform.**

Mentally tough athletes learn to interpret those sensations differently. Rather than thinking, “*I hope I don't fail,*” they learn to tell themselves, “**I've prepared for this opportunity.**” That shift in perspective can change everything.

Pressure Is a Privilege

Athletes sometimes wish pressure would simply disappear. Consider, however, what pressure actually represents: **meaningful opportunities**. No one feels much pressure sitting on the bench after the season is over. Pressure exists because something valuable is at stake. It's the chance to compete, the opportunity to improve, the ability to help your teammates, or the possibility of discovering what you are capable of.

Viewed through that lens, pressure becomes less of a burden and more of an invitation. **It invites athletes to trust what they have practiced, teams to rely on one another, and competitors to become fully present in the moment.** Pressure does not have to be something you fear. **It can be evidence that you have been given an opportunity to do something that matters.**

Coach's Locker Room

Teaching Athletes to Perform Under Pressure

Coaching Message #1: "Trust Your Preparation"

Countless hours have already been invested preparing for moments like this. The skills have been practiced, the body has been conditioned, and mistakes have provided valuable lessons along the way. **Now is the time to trust the work you have already done.** When preparation and belief come together, confidence has a foundation to grow.

Coaching Message #2: "Stay Present"

"When pressure rises, the mind wants to race ahead. It wonders about the scoreboard. It worries about the outcome. Bring your attention back to one simple question: 'What does this moment require?' That question keeps your focus where it belongs."

Coaching Message #3: "Pressure Is Shared"

"You are never alone in competition. Your teammates are beside you. Your coaches believe in you. Trust the people around you. Great teams do not ask one athlete to carry the entire burden. They compete together." Great teammates learn how to make the people around them better.

Coaching Message #4: "Embrace the Moment"

"Pressure means you have been given an opportunity to do something that matters. Instead of wishing the pressure away, embrace the moment and recognize what it represents, the chance to compete, trust your preparation, and discover what you are capable of

accomplishing. Mentally tough athletes don't ask, 'How do I get rid of this pressure?' They ask, '**How can I use this moment to become my best?**'"

Team Huddle

Building Confidence Under Pressure

Question 1: What situations create the most pressure for athletes?

Frame the discussion: "Pressure looks different for every athlete."

Discuss:

- close games,
- important competitions,
- fear of mistakes,
- leadership roles,
- expectations,
- playing in front of others.

Ask: "Which situations challenge you the most?"

Question 2: How does your body respond when you feel pressure?

Discuss:

- faster heartbeat,
- tense muscles,
- quicker breathing,
- racing thoughts,
- increased focus.

Ask: "Which of these responses help you compete, and which ones distract you?"

Question 3: What habits help athletes stay composed during pressure?

Encourage discussion about:

- breathing,
- routines,
- positive self-talk,
- communication,
- trusting preparation,
- staying present.

Ask: "Which habit works best for you?"

Question 4: How can teammates reduce pressure for one another?

Discuss:

- encouragement,
- calm communication,
- confidence,
- shared responsibility,
- leadership.

Finish by asking: "What kind of teammate helps others perform their best during difficult moments?"

Practice Integration

Training for Pressure - Pressure should be practiced, not avoided.

Create Championship Moments - Design practice situations that simulate meaningful competition.

Examples include:

- one final free throw to finish practice,
- one final serve,
- one pressure putt,
- one final possession,
- one last repetition with the team watching.

Before the drill begins, remind athletes: "This is not about perfection. It is about learning how to compete when the moment feels important."

Pressure Routine - Teach athletes a simple four-step routine.

- Breathe - Slow your breathing.
- Focus - Identify the immediate task.
- Trust - Remember your preparation.
- Compete - Commit fully to the action.

Practice this routine repeatedly until it becomes automatic.

Praise Composure - Recognize athletes who remain calm under pressure. Comments such as:

- "I like your body language."
- "Excellent composure."
- "You stayed with your routine."

The Paragon Challenge

Today's Challenge: Trust Your Training

Throughout today's practice, every athlete commits to:

- Use a personal pressure routine.
- Stay focused on the present.
- Trust preparation instead of worrying about outcomes.
- Encourage teammates during difficult moments.

At the end of practice ask:

"When pressure increased today, what helped you stay composed?"

Coach's Observation Notebook

Watch for:

- **Composure**
 - Who stays calm during difficult moments?
 - Who allows emotions to take control?
- **Decision-Making**
 - Who continues making sound decisions under pressure?
 - Who rushes unnecessarily?
- **Communication**
 - Who encourages teammates during stressful situations?
- **Leadership**
 - Who gives confidence to others when the pressure rises?
 - Those athletes become steady leaders in competition.

Athlete Reflection

My Pressure Reflection

1. What situations create the most pressure for me?
2. How did I respond today?
3. What helped me stay focused?
4. What pressure routine will I continue using?

Coach's Clipboard

Remember:

- Pressure is normal.
- Preparation builds confidence.
- Stay present.
- Trust your training.
- Great teams share pressure together.

Research Into Practice

Research in sport psychology suggests that athletes perform more consistently under pressure when they rely on well-established routines rather than trying to "do something extra."

Pressure often narrows attention and increases self-consciousness. Simple, practiced routines such as controlled breathing, cue words, and present-focused attention help athletes redirect their concentration to the task they have trained to perform. In terms of the physiology of pressure (anxiety), when we feel “nerves” prior to an important task, that’s the body’s way of preparing itself to do well. Remind your athletes of this simple idea.

Coaches can strengthen this ability by introducing competitive situations in practice that resemble the emotional intensity of games. When athletes repeatedly experience these situations in training, they become more comfortable performing when the stakes are high.

The objective is not to remove pressure. The objective is to become familiar with it.

Championship Quote

"Pressure is not the enemy. It is an opportunity to demonstrate what preparation has made possible."

The athletes who perform well under pressure are usually the ones who have learned to trust the work they have already invested.

Championship Conversation

During the final minutes of a close contest, a young athlete looked toward the bench with uncertainty. The coach simply smiled and made eye contact. There was no long speech. No complicated instruction. (FYI – Athletes do not like to have a lot of detail given to them just before they are expected to perform under pressure. Remember, the more intense the moment, the simpler the coaching should be.) The coach gave only one calm reminder.

"You've prepared for this."

The athlete took a deep breath. Instead of worrying about the final outcome, attention shifted to the next assignment. One play. One decision. One opportunity.

The game eventually ended, but the most important victory happened before the final whistle. The athlete discovered that confidence does not come from knowing what the outcome will be. It comes from trusting the preparation that came before the moment. That lesson stayed with the athlete long after the season had ended.

Coaching Matters Connections

Continue the conversation with these **Coaching Matters** articles:

Thriving Under Pressure: How the Phrase "Trust Your Training" Will Shape a Winning Mentality

Discover practical ways to help athletes replace fear with confidence by consistently trusting their preparation.

Practice Motivation vs. Game Motivation: Helping Athletes Flip the Switch When It Matters Most

Why does an athlete who looks confident and dominant in practice sometimes become hesitant and uncertain when the lights come on? This article gives coaches specific strategies to help athletes transfer their preparation into confident, consistent competition performance.

Words That Win: How the Pregame Coaching Talk Can Build Champions

Explore how intentional coaching language before competition can strengthen confidence, reduce anxiety, and prepare athletes to perform at their best.

Final Thought

Pressure is one of the few experiences shared by every athlete. No one completely escapes it. The difference is found in how athletes interpret it. Some see pressure as a warning. Mentally tough athletes see it as an opportunity. They breathe. They focus. They trust their preparation. They compete with confidence.

When the biggest moments arrive, they do not search for a different version of themselves. They simply rely on the habits they have practiced every day. That is the quiet confidence of a mentally tough competitor.

Chapter 15

Day 12: Routine

Consistency Creates Confidence

Today's Theme – BUILDING YOUR MENTAL ROUTINE

Key Principle: Mentally tough athletes understand that consistent routines create consistent performances. While every competition is different, the habits that prepare athletes for success should remain remarkably consistent.

Why This Matters

Every athlete wants to feel confident before competition, yet some wait for confidence to simply appear. **Championship athletes take a different approach. They build confidence long before the opening whistle through consistent, purposeful routines.**

What exactly is a routine? More than simply doing the same things every day, it is a purposeful sequence of habits designed to prepare the mind and body to perform at their best. Great athletes often develop routines before practice, competition, individual skills, free throws, serves, putts, and even before stepping into the batter's box. These routines are not superstitions; **they are preparation.**

When everything around an athlete feels uncertain, a consistent routine provides something stable to rely on. The opponent changes, the crowd changes, the weather changes, the score changes, and the pressure changes but **the routine remains familiar.** That familiarity creates confidence. Rather than wondering how they will perform, mentally tough athletes simply begin following the habits they have practiced hundreds of times before. **Routine replaces uncertainty with preparation.**

Small Habits Produce Big Results

Championship performances are rarely built through one dramatic moment. More often, they emerge from ordinary habits repeated consistently: a few minutes of focused preparation, intentional breathing, positive self-talk, reviewing the game plan, visualizing success, stretching with purpose, or communicating with teammates.

Individually, none of these habits may seem extraordinary. **Together, they prepare athletes to perform with greater confidence, focus, and consistency.**

The greatest value of a routine is not perfection; **it is reliability.** Athletes know what to expect because they have intentionally prepared for the moment, allowing familiar habits to provide confidence when the competition becomes anything but familiar.

Coach's Locker Room

Teaching Athletes the Value of Routine

Coaching Message #1: "Trust Your Process"

"Successful athletes don't invent a new plan on game day. They trust the habits that have helped them improve throughout the season. Routine creates familiarity. Familiarity reduces uncertainty. And confidence grows when athletes know they are prepared."

Coaching Message #2: "Simple Is Powerful"

"Your routine doesn't need to be complicated. In fact, simpler is often better. A few meaningful habits practiced consistently are usually far more effective than a long checklist that changes every week. Build routines you can depend on."

Coaching Message #3: "Consistency Wins"

"Some days you'll feel energetic. Some days you'll feel tired. Some days everything will seem easy. Other days it won't. Your routine helps you perform consistently regardless of how you feel. Discipline often carries us farther than emotion."

Coaching Message #4: "Routines Anchor You Under Pressure"

"When competition becomes intense, the mind can become distracted by the score, the opponent, or the importance of the moment. A well-practiced routine gives athletes something familiar to return to when pressure rises. **Trust your routine, focus on the next step, and let your preparation guide your performance.**"

Team Huddle

Building Championship Habits

Question 1: Why do routines help athletes perform better?

Frame the discussion: "Good routines help prepare both the body and the mind."

Discussion examples:

- confidence,
- focus,
- preparation,
- consistency,
- reduced anxiety.

Ask: "Which benefit have you experienced personally?"

Question 2: What habits should every athlete include before competition?

Encourage discussion about:

- warm-up,
- breathing,
- visualization,
- hydration,
- positive self-talk,
- reviewing team goals,
- communication.

Ask: "Which habits help you feel most prepared?"

Question 3: How do routines help during pressure situations?

Frame the discussion: "When emotions increase, routines provide something familiar."

Discuss:

- slowing down,
- focusing attention,
- calming nerves,
- trusting preparation.

Ask: "How could a routine help after a mistake or during a close game?"

Question 4: What routines should define our team?

Invite athletes to identify shared habits. Examples include:

- encouraging teammates,
- communicating constantly,
- beginning practice with purpose,
- finishing every drill,
- responding positively after mistakes.

Ask: "What team routines would strengthen our culture?"

Practice Integration

Developing Consistent Habits - Today's goal is to help athletes intentionally practice routines.

Build Your Personal Routine - Ask every athlete to create a simple routine that includes three to five intentional habits before competition.

Possible elements include:

- controlled breathing,
- reviewing one coaching point,
- positive self-talk,
- visualization,
- stretching,
- encouraging a teammate.

Remind athletes: "The best routine is one you will consistently use."

Repeat Before Every Drill - Before selected practice activities, pause briefly. Ask athletes to perform their personal routine. Even if it lasts only a few seconds, repetition strengthens familiarity. Eventually, routines become automatic.

Team Routine - Develop one short routine the entire team performs together before beginning practice or competition. Examples include:

- a team huddle,
- one shared phrase,
- reviewing team standards,
- recognizing a teammate,
- one collective deep breath.

Shared routines strengthen team identity.

The Paragon Challenge

Today's Challenge: Build Your Routine

Throughout today's practice, every athlete commits to:

- Follow a consistent personal routine.
- Stay focused on preparation instead of outcomes.
- Encourage teammates to remain disciplined.
- Reflect on which habits produce the greatest confidence.

After practice ask: "Which part of your routine helped you feel most prepared today?"

Coach's Observation Notebook

Watch for:

- **Consistency**
 - Who follows their routine every time?
 - Who changes habits depending on circumstances?
- **Focus**
 - Who appears mentally prepared before each drill?
 - Who rushes into activities without preparation?
- **Discipline**
 - Who remains committed to small habits throughout practice?
- **Leadership**
 - Who models consistency for teammates?

Those athletes help establish dependable team standards.

Athlete Reflection

My Routine Reflection

1. Which part of my routine helped me the most today?
2. What habit do I want to strengthen?
3. How did my routine influence my confidence?
4. What routine will I continue using throughout the season?

Coach's Clipboard

Remember:

- Consistency builds confidence.
- Habits shape performance.
- Preparation reduces uncertainty.
- Keep routines simple.
- Repeat what works.

Research Into Practice

Sport psychology research consistently supports the use of **pre-performance routines** to improve focus, emotional control, and consistency. Effective routines help athletes direct their attention toward controllable behaviors rather than external distractions.

Research also suggests that routines become most effective when they are practiced regularly during training, not introduced for the first time during important competitions.

The objective is not to eliminate nervousness. It is to create familiar habits that help athletes respond confidently regardless of the situation. When preparation becomes routine, confidence becomes more dependable.

Championship Quote

"Confidence is often the result of doing the right things consistently, long before the competition begins."

Championship athletes trust routines because routines remind them they are prepared.

Championship Conversation

A coach noticed that one athlete always seemed calm before important competitions. While others hurried through warm-ups or worried about the opponent, this athlete followed the same simple routine every time. A few minutes of stretching. Several controlled breaths. A brief moment of visualization. A quiet word of encouragement to a teammate. Nothing flashy. Nothing complicated.

When another athlete asked why the routine never changed, the response was simple. "It reminds me that I've already done the hard work. Now I just get to compete." That routine didn't guarantee perfect performances. It did provide something equally valuable. Consistency. And consistency became one of the foundations of confidence.

Coaching Matters Connections

Continue the conversation with these **Coaching Matters** articles:

The Winning Edge: 10 Ways Pre-Skill Mental Routines Can Transform an Athlete's Game

Discover practical pre-performance routines that help athletes improve concentration, confidence, and consistency before every important skill.

Coaching Language That Motivates Teen Athletes When Under Pressure

Positive motivation at pressure moments requires clear thinking and steady belief. Coaches who master their words help athletes stay present, confident, and aggressive when it matters most. In the biggest moments, the goal isn't to eliminate nerves. It's to give athletes language that helps them play through them.

The Confidence Conundrum: Strategies That Really Work for Coaches

Explore how coaches can help athletes build lasting confidence through preparation, repetition, and daily habits rather than temporary motivation.

Final Thought

Championship performances are built on ordinary habits. **Long before the game begins, an athlete who follows a consistent routine is already preparing for success.** Every deep breath, purposeful warm-up, encouraging word, and moment of focused preparation adds another brick to the foundation of confidence.

While not every circumstance can be controlled, **your preparation can be.** Choose routines that strengthen your mind and habits that prepare your body. Embrace consistency rather than uncertainty, because athletes who prepare consistently are more likely to compete consistently. **And consistency is one of the greatest competitive advantages a team can possess.**

Chapter 16

Day 13: Play With Confidence

Trust Your Preparation and Compete with Freedom

Today's Theme - PLAY WITH CONFIDENCE

Key Principle: Mentally tough athletes understand that confidence is not something they hope to feel. It is something they intentionally build through preparation, purposeful practice, and courageous competition.

Why This Matters

Every coach wants confident athletes, and every athlete wants to compete without hesitation. Most competitors have experienced those special moments when performance seems effortless. The mind is clear, the body responds naturally, decisions come quickly, and competition becomes enjoyable.

Yet confidence is often misunderstood. Many athletes believe confidence comes first: *“If I can just feel confident, then I’ll play well.”* Championship athletes discover the opposite.

Confidence usually follows preparation.

Countless repetitions build it. Challenges strengthen it. Each time an athlete responds positively after a mistake, confidence becomes a little stronger. **True confidence is earned.**

Rather than hoping everything will go well, confident athletes develop the belief that, regardless of what happens, they have prepared themselves to compete. Nervousness still occurs, mistakes still happen, and adversity remains part of competition. **What changes is the athlete's response to those moments.**

Instead of trying to avoid mistakes, mentally tough athletes focus on playing boldly. Trust grows in their preparation, their teammates, and ultimately themselves. **Confidence allows athletes to compete with freedom rather than fear.**

Confidence Is Built, Not Borrowed

Two very different kinds of confidence can influence an athlete's performance. One depends heavily on circumstances. Athletes feel confident when they are winning, shots are falling, or everything seems to be going their way. Unfortunately, **that kind of confidence can disappear just as quickly as circumstances change.**

A far more dependable confidence comes from preparation, discipline, experience, and repeatedly proving to yourself that you can handle difficult situations. Even after a mistake, this confidence remains steady because it is built on something deeper than the scoreboard.

At its core, this kind of confidence reminds athletes: **“I've prepared for moments like this.”** That quiet, earned confidence can become one of the greatest competitive advantages an athlete possesses.

Coach's Locker Room

Teaching Athletes to Play With Confidence

Coaching Message #1: "Trust the Work"

"Confidence doesn't magically appear on game day; **it grows from the work you have put in long before competition begins.** Every completed practice, difficult workout, adjustment, and hard-earned lesson adds to that foundation. Today isn't about hoping you're ready. **It's about trusting the preparation that has brought you to this moment.**"

Coaching Message #2: "Play to Succeed, Not to Avoid Failure"

"There is a big difference between protecting yourself from mistakes and competing to make something good happen. Fear causes hesitation. Confidence encourages commitment. Championship athletes compete aggressively because they understand that growth requires courage."

Coaching Message #3: "Compete Free"

"You don't have to be perfect today. You simply need to give your best. Trust your preparation. Support your teammates and compete with joy. When your attention stays on the present moment, confidence has room to grow."

Coaching Message #4: "Respond With Confidence"

"Confident athletes understand that mistakes and adversity are part of competition. When something goes wrong, don't allow one moment to define the next one. **Reset quickly, trust your preparation, and respond with purpose.** Confidence isn't the absence of mistakes; it is the belief that you can handle whatever happens next."

Team Huddle

Building Authentic Confidence

Question 1: Where does lasting confidence come from?

Frame the discussion: "Confidence built on preparation usually lasts longer than confidence built only on results."

Discuss:

- practice,
- preparation,
- learning,
- resilience,
- discipline,
- experience.

Ask: "Which experiences have strengthened your confidence the most?"

Question 2: What causes athletes to lose confidence?

Discuss:

- mistakes,
- comparison,
- fear of failure,
- criticism,
- unrealistic expectations.

Ask: "How can we respond differently when confidence begins to fade?"

Question 3: What does confident body language look like?

Encourage athletes to identify behaviors such as:

- eye contact,
- strong posture,
- positive communication,
- steady effort,
- composure.

Ask: "How can your body language influence both your own confidence and your teammates' confidence?"

Question 4: How can our team help build one another's confidence?

Discuss:

- encouragement,
- celebrating improvement,
- constructive feedback,
- believing in teammates,
- recognizing effort.

Finish by asking: "What can we do every day to make confidence grow across our entire team?"

Practice Integration

Practicing Confident Competition - Today's practice emphasizes commitment over perfection.

Commit to Every Rep - Challenge athletes to perform every repetition with complete commitment. No hesitation. No second-guessing. If a mistake happens, learn from it and move forward. Confidence grows when athletes commit fully to their decisions.

Strength Recognition

Near the end of practice, ask each athlete to identify one personal strength they demonstrated today. Examples might include:

- persistence,
- communication,
- leadership,
- effort,
- focus,
- composure.

Recognizing genuine strengths reinforces healthy confidence.

Encourage Courage - Today, praise athletes who compete boldly. Examples include:

- "I like your confidence."
- "Great commitment."
- "You trusted your preparation."
- "Excellent recovery after that mistake."

Celebrate courageous effort, not just successful outcomes.

The Paragon Challenge

Today's Challenge: Compete With Confidence

Throughout today's practice, every athlete commits to:

- Trust personal preparation.
- Compete aggressively and decisively.
- Display confident body language.
- Encourage confidence in teammates.

At the end of practice ask: "What helped you compete more confidently today?"

Coach's Observation Notebook

Watch for:

- **Commitment**
 - Who competes without hesitation?
 - Who becomes overly cautious after mistakes?
- **Recovery**
 - Who regains confidence quickly after adversity?
 - Who struggles to move forward?
- **Communication**
 - Who speaks confidently and encourages teammates?
- **Leadership**
 - Who helps others believe in themselves?

Those athletes become confidence builders within your program.

Athlete Reflection

My Confidence Reflection

1. What helped me feel confident today?
2. When did I trust my preparation?
3. How did I encourage confidence in a teammate?
4. What strength will I continue developing?

Coach's Clipboard

Remember:

- Confidence is earned.
- Preparation builds belief.
- Courage strengthens confidence.
- Trust your training.
- Compete with freedom.

Research Into Practice

Sport psychology research consistently demonstrates that **self-confidence is strengthened through mastery experiences** by successfully completing challenging tasks through effort and preparation.

Confidence also grows when athletes:

- experience steady improvement,
- receive constructive coaching,
- practice positive self-talk,
- observe teammates modeling success,
- overcome setbacks.

Coaches contribute significantly by emphasizing controllable behaviors rather than simply praising outcomes. When athletes repeatedly experience success through disciplined preparation, confidence becomes more stable and less dependent on external circumstances.

Championship Quote

"Confidence grows every time preparation meets courageous action."

Championship athletes understand that belief is strengthened through what they consistently do. Not simply by what they hope to feel.

Championship Conversation

A talented athlete entered every competition with tremendous ability but often hesitated during important moments. After one practice, the coach asked, "Do you trust your preparation?" The athlete thought for a moment. "Yes." "Then why are you playing as though you don't?"

That question stayed with the athlete. At the next competition, the goal was not to be perfect. The goal was simply to trust the preparation that had already taken place. There

were still mistakes. There were still challenges. But there was also something new. Freedom.

The athlete stopped trying to avoid failure and began competing to create success. That change in mindset unlocked a level of performance that had been there all along. The confidence hadn't suddenly appeared. It had been built through months of preparation. It simply needed to be trusted.

Coaching Matters Connections

Continue the conversation with these **Coaching Matters** articles:

Confidence vs. Cockiness: Key Differences and How to Build True Confidence in Athletes

Explore practical ways to help athletes develop authentic confidence rooted in preparation, humility, and continual improvement.

The Confidence Conundrum: Strategies That Really Work for Coaches

Learn why lasting confidence is created through daily habits, effective coaching, and meaningful experiences rather than temporary motivation.

The Confidence-Motivation Loop: Building Belief That Fuels Performance

Discover how when confidence and motivation feed each other, something powerful happens. Athletes believe they can succeed, so they invest more effort. That effort leads to improvement, which strengthens confidence again.

Final Thought

Confidence is not reserved for the most talented athlete. It is available to every athlete who chooses to prepare with discipline, compete with courage, and learn from every experience.

Some days you will feel confident. Other days you may not. Do not allow your feelings to determine your effort. Trust the work you have invested. Trust your teammates. Trust your preparation. And then compete with freedom.

Because the athletes who play their best are rarely those who never experience doubt. They are the ones who choose to move forward despite it. Confidence is not the absence of uncertainty. It is the decision to compete anyway.

Chapter 17

Day 14: Commit to the Process

Becoming the Person and Team You Want to Become

Today's Theme - COMMIT TO THE PROCESS

Key Principle: Mentally tough athletes understand that success is not created by one great performance. It is created through daily commitment to the habits, standards, and choices that lead to improvement.

Why This Matters

Every athlete wants the reward. They've been working hard for the championship, the starting position, the personal record, the recognition, or that moment when their hope finally becomes visible. Those accomplishments are meaningful, and they are certainly part of why athletes compete.

Yet championship athletes understand something important: **the reward is the result of the process.** What happens when no one is watching often matters most. Early morning workouts, extra repetitions, difficult conversations, and the decision to remain focused when practice becomes challenging all contribute to the process. So does choosing to encourage a teammate instead of focusing only on yourself and maintaining the discipline to improve when progress feels slow.

Frustration often develops when athletes focus too heavily on outcomes they cannot completely control. The scoreboard, statistics, recognition, playing time, and other external measures can easily become distractions.

Mentally tough athletes direct their attention toward what they can control: **preparation, attitude, effort, response, and commitment.** Excellence is not created in a single moment; **it is developed through a consistent way of living and competing.**

The question isn't simply, *"Can you perform well once?"* Instead, ask yourself: **"Can you consistently become the athlete your goals require you to be?"**

The Process Creates the Person

Committing to the process produces benefits that extend far beyond improved athletic performance. Along the way, athletes develop qualities that can shape who they become in every area of life.

Discipline becomes stronger. Resilience develops through adversity. Responsibility grows through accountability. Confidence emerges from overcoming challenges. Preparation becomes a habit, and dependability becomes part of an athlete's character.

The habits developed through athletics can become **habits for life**. An athlete who learns to persevere through difficult practices becomes better prepared to handle difficult circumstances beyond competition. Someone who embraces accountability becomes a stronger teammate, leader, student, and person.

The process doesn't simply improve performance. It changes the person.

Trusting the Journey

Progress is rarely perfectly predictable. Some days, improvement is obvious; on others, it can feel almost invisible. Questions naturally arise: *“Am I really getting better?” “Is all this effort worth it?” “Why am I not seeing results yet?”*

Those moments are precisely when commitment matters most. **The process requires patience because growth often happens before it becomes visible.**

Strength may develop before an athlete notices it. Confidence can grow before it is fully recognized. Leadership may emerge long before others acknowledge it. Mentally tough athletes continue investing in the process because they understand that meaningful improvement is often taking place beneath the surface, even when progress feels slow.

Trust the process. Trust the work. Trust the journey.

Coach's Locker Room

Teaching Athletes to Commit to the Process

Coaching Message #1: "Fall in Love With Improvement"

“Great athletes don't simply love winning. They **love getting better**. The process of learning, improving, and embracing challenges becomes part of what they enjoy about competing. Every practice provides an opportunity to become more skilled, more disciplined, and better prepared for whatever comes next.”

Coaching Message #2: "Standards Define Us"

"Your goals are important. But your standards determine whether you reach them. Goals are what you hope to achieve. Standards are what you consistently do. Championship teams are built by athletes who live their standards every day."

Coaching Message #3: "This Is Who We Are"

"The strongest teams do not wait until game day to become competitive. They do not wait until pressure arrives to become disciplined. Their identity is created every day. Who we are in practice becomes who we are in competition."

Coaching Message #4: "Trust the Process"

"Improvement doesn't always happen as quickly as you want, and progress isn't always easy to see. There will be days when the results don't seem to match the effort, but those are the moments when commitment matters most. **Keep showing up, keep working, and keep trusting the process.** The athlete you want to become is being built through the choices you make today."

Team Huddle

Creating a Process-Driven Culture

Question 1: What does it mean to commit to the process?

Frame the discussion: "The process includes all the daily actions that move us toward our goals."

Discuss:

- preparation,
- effort,
- attitude,
- discipline,
- teamwork,
- improvement.

Ask: "What part of the process is easiest for you? What part is most difficult?"

Question 2: Why is it sometimes difficult to trust the process?

Discuss:

- wanting immediate results,
- comparing yourself to others,
- frustration,
- setbacks,
- impatience.

Ask: "What helps athletes continue working when results are not immediate?"

Question 3:

What standards should define our team?

Encourage athletes to identify behaviors they want associated with the program. Examples include:

- compete with purpose,
- support teammates,
- respond positively,
- communicate consistently,
- finish strong.

Ask: "What should people notice about our team every day?"

Question 4: How do we continue this challenge after today?

Frame the discussion: "Fourteen days can begin a journey, but lasting change requires continued commitment."

Discuss:

- personal goals,
- team standards,
- daily habits,
- accountability.

Ask: "What mental toughness habit will you continue developing?"

Practice Integration

Turning Mental Toughness Into a Lifestyle - The final challenge is not simply completing fourteen days. The challenge is continuing the habits.

Create Your Personal Mental Toughness Commitment - Ask each athlete to complete these statements:

- **I will become mentally stronger by:**
- **One habit I will continue is:**
- **One challenge I will embrace is:**
- **One way I will help my teammates is:**

Team Commitment Statement - Have the team create a shared commitment. Examples include:

- "We compete with purpose."
- "We respond with resilience."
- "We trust our preparation."
- "We make each other better."
- "We commit to the process every day."

The statement is only valuable if the team lives it.

Celebrate Growth

Take time to recognize improvement from the challenge. Celebrate:

- Better communication,
- Stronger focus,
- Improved responses to mistakes,
- Greater confidence,
- Stronger team connection.

Mental toughness grows when progress is noticed.

The Paragon Challenge

Today's Challenge: Continue the Journey

After completing the 14-Day Mental Toughness Challenge, every athlete commits to:

- Continue developing positive mental habits.
- Hold themselves accountable.
- Choose growth over comfort.
- Support teammates through challenges.
- Trust the process.

At the end of practice ask: "Who are we becoming because of the choices we make every day?"

Coach's Observation Notebook

Watch for:

- **Ownership**
 - Who takes responsibility for improvement?
- **Consistency**
 - Who maintains standards when motivation decreases?
- **Leadership**
 - Who influences teammates through actions?
- **Growth**
 - Who demonstrates meaningful change throughout the challenge?
 - Those athletes are building the foundation of championship culture.

Athlete Reflection

My Process Reflection

1. What mental toughness habit has helped me the most?
2. What area still needs improvement?
3. What standard do I want to maintain moving forward?
4. Who do I want to become as an athlete and teammate?

Coach's Clipboard

Remember:

- Results follow routines.
- Standards create culture.
- Improvement requires patience.
- Commitment beats temporary motivation.
- The process never ends.

Research Into Practice

Research in performance psychology consistently emphasizes the importance of focusing on controllable behaviors rather than becoming consumed by outcomes.

Athletes who focus on the process tend to demonstrate:

- Greater persistence,
- Improved resilience,
- Stronger motivation,
- Better emotional control.

Process-focused athletes evaluate success by asking:

- "Did I prepare well?"
- "Did I give my best effort?"
- "Did I respond positively?"
- "Did I improve?"

This mindset allows athletes to remain motivated through both success and adversity because their confidence is connected to actions they can control. Coaches who emphasize process help athletes develop skills that extend beyond sports and into lifelong performance.

Championship Quote

"Championships are won long before they are celebrated."

The greatest teams understand that success is built through thousands of small decisions made consistently over time.

Championship Conversation

At the beginning of a season, a coach asked the team a simple question: "How many of you want to have a successful season?" Every hand went up.

The coach then asked: "How many of you are willing to do the things necessary every day to create that success?" The room became quieter.

The coach smiled and explained: "Everyone wants the outcome. Champions commit to the process." Throughout the season, the team focused less on predicting results and more on building daily habits. They practiced with purpose. They supported each other. They responded well after setbacks. They improved one day at a time.

When the final competition arrived, the team was prepared. Not because they discovered a new level of effort that day, but because they had built the habits needed for that moment. The outcome was important. But the transformation that happened along the way was even more valuable.

Coaching Matters Connections

Continue the conversation with these **Coaching Matters** articles:

Motivating Student-Athletes Through the Long Season

Explore strategies for helping athletes maintain purpose, commitment, and motivation through the challenges of an entire competitive season.

Players Will Do What You Train Them To Do

Discover why daily habits and repeated behaviors eventually become the identity of a program.

Finishing Strong: Lessons From Competitive Sport and Life

Learn how commitment, resilience, and consistent effort help athletes finish seasons and challenges with purpose.

Final Thought

The Paragon 14-Day Mental Toughness Challenge ends today. But mental toughness is not something athletes complete. It is something they continue developing. Every practice provides another opportunity. Every challenge provides another lesson. Every setback provides another chance to grow.

The mentally tough athlete is not the athlete who never struggles. It is the athlete who continues moving forward. The journey toward excellence is built one decision at a time. One habit and one day at a time. Commit to the process. Trust the journey. Become the person and teammate you are capable of becoming.

The challenge is complete.

The growth continues.

Part III

MAKING IT

LAST

Chapter 18 **From Challenge to Culture**

Continue the Journey with [Paragon Coaching Resources](#)



Chapter 18

From Challenge to Culture

Making Mental Toughness a Permanent Part of Your Team

Completing the Paragon 14-Day Mental Toughness Challenge is an accomplishment. but completing the challenge is not the goal. The goal is **change**.

Over the past 14 days, your athletes have been introduced to mental skills and competitive habits that can make them better athletes and better teammates. They have learned to take ownership, control the controllables, reset after mistakes, use productive self-talk, visualize success, embrace discomfort, learn from failure, compete with intention, create positive team energy, handle pressure, establish routines, play with confidence, and commit to the process.

Now comes the most important question: **What are we going to do with what we have learned?**

Mental toughness does not become part of a team's culture because athletes complete a workbook or participate in 14 conversations. It becomes part of the culture when the team **continues to practice the behaviors after the challenge is over.**

The challenge has given your team a foundation. Your responsibility as the coach is to help turn that foundation into a habit, and eventually into an identity.

STEP 1: LOOK BACK BEFORE YOU LOOK FORWARD

Begin by giving your athletes an opportunity to reflect on the 14-day experience. Do not immediately move into "What's next?" Give them time to recognize how far they have come.

Ask your athletes:

- What is the most important thing you learned during the challenge?
- Which day's lesson had the greatest impact on you?
- Which mental skill have you actually used in practice or competition?
- What have you learned about yourself as a competitor?
- What have you noticed changing in our team?
- Which mental toughness skill do you still need to improve?

Encourage athletes to provide specific examples. Instead of accepting: "I have become more mentally tough."

Ask: "Tell me about a specific situation when you responded differently than you would have before the challenge." That distinction is important. Mental toughness is not simply something an athlete **knows**. It is something an athlete **does**.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE CHANGES

As a team, discuss what has changed during the 14 days. You may have noticed athletes recovering more quickly after mistakes. Perhaps there is less complaining about officials. Maybe athletes are communicating more effectively, encouraging teammates, or staying engaged when they are not playing.

Look for behavioral evidence. Ask: "**What are we doing differently now than we were doing 14 days ago?**"

Create a team list. For example:

Before the Challenge:

- We sometimes complained about officials.
- Players stayed upset after mistakes.
- Negative body language appeared after setbacks.
- Some athletes became quiet when things went badly.
- We sometimes focused more on the score than our performance.

After the Challenge:

- We use "Next Play" to reset.
- We talk more about controllables.
- We encourage teammates after mistakes.
- We use breathing and routines to regain focus.
- We focus more on effort and execution.

The purpose of this exercise is to help athletes **see the change**. When athletes recognize their own progress, they are more likely to take ownership of maintaining it.



STEP 3: FIND YOUR TEAM'S MOST IMPORTANT MENTAL TOUGHNESS SKILLS

Your team does not need to remember all 14 lessons equally. Choose the **three to five mental toughness behaviors** that you want to become permanent characteristics of your team. For example:

Our Mental Toughness Standards

- 1. Next Play** - We don't allow one mistake to become two.
- 2. Control the Controllables** - We focus our energy on what we can influence.
- 3. Trust Your Training** - We prepare with purpose and trust our preparation under pressure.
- 4. Compete Every Rep** - Our effort and attitude are not negotiable.
- 5. Be a Great Teammate** - We bring energy, encouragement, and communication to our team.

These become more than phrases. They become **behavioral standards**.

STEP 4: TURN WORDS INTO BEHAVIORS

One of the biggest mistakes coaches make with mental toughness is using powerful words without defining what those words actually mean. For example, telling athletes to "be mentally tough" is not enough. Ask: **What does mental toughness look like?** If your team chooses "Next Play," define it. It might mean:

- Take a breath after a mistake.
- Use a reset phrase.
- Immediately get back into position.
- Communicate with a teammate.
- Focus on the next assignment.

If your team chooses "Compete Every Rep," define that too. It might mean:

- Sprint instead of jog.
- Communicate every possession.
- Finish every drill.
- Respond positively to coaching.
- Stay engaged when tired.

Culture becomes powerful when expectations become observable. Your athletes should be able to recognize mental toughness when they see it.

STEP 5: CREATE YOUR TEAM'S MENTAL TOUGHNESS LANGUAGE

Teams develop their own language. Use that language intentionally. Throughout the season, reinforce the phrases your athletes learned during the challenge:

"Next Play."

"Control what you can control."

"Trust your training."

"Stay present."

"Compete the next rep."

"Own it."

"Reset."

The coach does not need to give a 10-minute speech every time an athlete struggles. Sometimes one phrase is enough. A player makes an error. The coach says: "Next Play."

The athlete knows exactly what that means. That is the beginning of culture. Eventually, the coach may not need to say anything. A teammate may say: "Next Play." **That is when you know the culture is beginning to belong to the team, rather than the coach.**

STEP 6: MAKE MENTAL TOUGHNESS PART OF PRACTICE

Do not put mental toughness back on the shelf after Day 14. Integrate it into normal training. For example:

During Warm-Ups - Ask athletes to identify their focus for the practice.

During Drills - Challenge athletes to maintain communication and effort when tired.

After Mistakes - Require athletes to demonstrate their reset routine.

During Competitive Drills - Introduce pressure intentionally.

At the End of Practice Ask: "Where did we demonstrate mental toughness today?"

This takes only a few minutes. The important thing is **consistency**. Mental skills become automatic when they are practiced repeatedly in situations that resemble competition.



STEP 7: CREATE PRESSURE IN PRACTICE

One of the best ways to make mental toughness permanent is to practice it when athletes are uncomfortable. If you want athletes to perform under pressure in competition, give them opportunities to experience pressure in practice. For example:

- Start a drill behind on the scoreboard.
- Give athletes a limited amount of time.
- Create a consequence for losing a competitive drill.
- Put an athlete in a pressure situation and require a reset after an error.
- Finish practice with a competitive challenge.
- Require communication when athletes are fatigued.

Then ask: "What happened to your thinking when the pressure increased?" And: "What mental skill helped you handle it?" The objective is not to create fear. The objective is to teach athletes:

"I have been here before. I know how to respond."

STEP 8: REINFORCE THE BEHAVIOR, NOT JUST THE RESULT

What coaches recognize gets repeated. If you only praise athletes when they score, win, or make a great play, athletes will naturally conclude that results are what matter most. Instead, recognize mental toughness when you see it. Say:

"I liked your response after that mistake."

"You didn't complain about the call. You got back to work."

"You were frustrated, but you stayed engaged."

"That was a great reset."

"You trusted your training when the pressure increased."

"You brought your teammates back into the game."

These comments teach athletes **what mental toughness looks like**. You are not simply praising them. You are reinforcing your culture.



STEP 9: LET ATHLETES BECOME THE TEACHERS

The ultimate goal is for mental toughness to become athlete-owned. Ask your captains and veteran athletes to help reinforce the team's standards. Challenge them to:

- Recognize teammates who demonstrate mental toughness.
- Use the team's language.
- Encourage teammates after mistakes.
- Model composure under pressure.
- Help younger athletes understand the team's expectations.

A powerful moment occurs when an athlete tells another athlete: "Forget that one. Next play." At that moment, the mental toughness program has moved beyond the coach. It has become part of the team.

STEP 10: DEVELOP A "MENTAL TOUGHNESS CHECK-IN"

Consider spending five minutes once a week reviewing one of your team's mental toughness standards. You might ask:

This Week's Standard: Control the Controllables Then ask:

"Where did we do this well?"

"Where did we struggle?"

"What will we do differently this week?"

Another week might focus on: **Next Play**. Another: **Compete Every Rep** Another: **Positive Team Energy** This keeps mental toughness alive without turning it into another major meeting or assignment.

STEP 11: IDENTIFY YOUR TEAM'S IDENTITY

Eventually, move the conversation from: "We are trying to become mentally tough." to: **"This is who we are."** Ask your athletes: **"What do we want people to say about our team?"** Maybe the answers include:

- We never quit.
- We respond to adversity.
- We play for one another.
- We stay composed.
- We compete.
- We are disciplined.
- We are confident.

Take the best responses and create a team identity statement. For example:

"We are a team that responds, competes, communicates, and trusts our preparation, especially when things get difficult."

Put it in your locker room or your practice plan. Use it in conversations. Most importantly, **live it.**

THE COACH'S FINAL TEAM DISCUSSION

Bring the team together after completing the challenge. You might begin with:

"Fourteen days ago, we started this challenge because mental toughness is an important part of becoming a better athlete. But we never intended for this to be just a 14-day activity. We wanted to give you tools you can use for the rest of your athletic careers and for the rest of your lives." Then ask the team:

- 1. What did you learn about yourself?** Give athletes time to answer honestly.
- 2. Which mental toughness skill will help you most in competition?** Ask them to give a specific example.
- 3. What has changed about our team?** Look for observable behaviors.
- 4. Where do we still need to grow?** Create an environment where athletes can identify weaknesses without embarrassment.
- 5. What three mental toughness standards should define this team?** Let the athletes help determine the answer.
- 6. What will we do to make these standards permanent?** Move the conversation from ideas to actions.

THE FINAL CHALLENGE

End the discussion with one final question: **"When adversity comes, and it will, what do you want our team to be known for?"**

Let the athletes answer. Then remind them: Mental toughness is not about never being nervous. It is not about never making mistakes or never becoming frustrated. It is not about pretending that difficult moments don't affect you.

Mental toughness is learning how to respond when those moments arrive. You will make mistakes and sometimes you will lose. You will experience pressure, become tired, face adversity, and sometimes struggle with your confidence.

Those moments are not evidence that the mental toughness challenge failed. Rather, those moments are where the challenge becomes meaningful. The goal is not to eliminate adversity. **The goal is to prepare your athletes to respond to it.**

FROM 14 DAYS TO A FULL SEASON

The Paragon 14-Day Mental Toughness Challenge was designed to help your athletes develop a collection of mental skills. Your job as the coach is to continue giving them opportunities to use those skills. Hold athletes accountable to them. And most importantly, **connect them to everyday competition.**

Over time, what was once a **lesson becomes a habit**. What was once a **habit becomes a behavior**. What was once a **behavior becomes a standard**. And what was once a **standard becomes part of the team's identity**. **That is when mental toughness becomes culture.**

Coach's Closing Thought

Your athletes may eventually forget individual drills, games, statistics, and even some of the lessons from this challenge.

But if you consistently teach them how to respond to adversity, how to control what they can control, how to recover from mistakes, how to trust their preparation, and how to compete for one another, you will have given them something far more valuable than a competitive advantage. You will have helped them develop a mindset they can carry **beyond the scoreboard.**



Continue the Journey with [Paragon Coaching Resources](#)

The **Paragon 14-Day Mental Toughness Challenge** is designed to help you build mentally tougher athletes and a stronger team culture. But your growth as a coach should not stop when the 14 days are over.

Paragon Coaching Resources provides practical, affordable resources designed specifically for coaches who want to become more effective leaders, teachers, and mentors.

Stay Connected Through [Coaching Matters](#)

The [Coaching Matters](#) blog provides practical coaching ideas you can use immediately. Articles address the challenges coaches face every day—from motivation and confidence to leadership, communication, team culture, performance psychology, and developing athletes who can thrive under pressure. **Read it. Apply it. Share it with your staff.**

Grow Professionally Through Online Professional Development

Paragon also offers [online professional development courses for coaches](#), including opportunities to earn **graduate credit**. These courses are designed with one purpose in mind: to give busy coaches useful ideas, strategies, and tools that can be **immediately applied to their teams and programs**. The courses are:

- **Affordable** — professional development doesn't have to be expensive.
 - **Online** — learn when and where it fits your schedule.
 - **Practical** — focused on real coaching challenges.
- **Immediately applicable** — take what you learn directly to practice.
- **Graduate-credit eligible** — an opportunity to grow professionally while advancing your education.

Keep Building

The best coaches never stop learning. They continue to ask questions, challenge their assumptions, develop new skills, and look for better ways to serve their athletes. The Paragon 14-Day Challenge may have helped you take the **next step in developing mentally tougher athletes**. Let Paragon Coaching Resources help you take the next step in becoming a **better coach**.

Explore Coaching Matters. Explore the professional development courses. Keep learning. Keep growing. Keep Coaching Matters.

Paragon Coaching Resources

Practical Resources. Professional Growth. Better Coaching.