



EMOTIONAL MANAGEMENT

THE CHAMPION'S MINDSET
THE FOUR SEASONS OF MENTAL PREPARATION

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"Calm mind brings inner strength and self-confidence". — Dalai Lama

"He who controls others may be powerful, but he who has mastered himself is mightier still." — Lao Tzu

"The greatest victory is over self." — Aristotle

It was August 8, 2012. David Cal lined up in Lane 7 for the C1 1000m final at the London Olympics. The water was steadier than expected, but the weight of the occasion was undeniable. His first stroke lacked precision. Yet, with 999 meters to go, there was plenty of time to adjust.

However, for the first part of the race, Cal lagged behind the leading group. At the 250m mark, he was still in 6th place. Doubts could have crept in—after all, he had already claimed two medals in Athens 2004 and another two in Beijing 2008. Four Olympic medals are a feat few achieve, and perhaps others in the field were hungrier for glory.

But Cal didn't panic. His strokes remained steady; only he knew his strategy and it was clear in his mind. He conserved energy, waiting for the right moment. As the final stretch approached, he surged with power and precision, closing the gap on Germany's Sebastian Brendel.

Brendel held his lead, but Cal's late charge secured him the silver medal—a testament to his emotional control and unyielding focus.

This wasn't just a display of skill. It was a masterclass in emotional management. Cal knew how to quiet his mind, trust his potential, and let his effort speak. His emotional control turned a grueling race into another triumph in a storied career.

Emotional management is a crucial aspect of mental training for Super-Champions. In competitive sports, where the physical and mental demands are intense, our ability to regulate emotions can greatly impact performance outcomes. Managing our emotions helps us maintain focus, resilience, and composure under pressure, transforming potentially disruptive feelings into sources of motivation and energy. This chapter explores why emotional management is vital in high-stakes environments and outlines foundational strategies to build this skill.

In high-performance settings, athletes frequently experience a range of emotions, including excitement, frustration, anxiety, and exhilaration. Without effective emotional management, these intense feelings can disrupt focus, interfere with decision-making, and lead to physical tension or fatigue. However, athletes who have developed strong emotional regulation skills can channel these feelings into positive outcomes, using emotional energy to fuel motivation and enhance concentration.

If we learn how to manage our emotions it will benefit us in several ways:

- **Maintaining composure:** By staying calm and centered, we will be able to perform consistently, regardless of external pressures or internal challenges.
- **Improving focus:** When emotions are managed, we can direct our attention fully to the present moment, avoiding distractions.

- **Enhancing resilience:** If we can control our emotional responses we will be more adaptable in the face of setbacks and can recover more quickly after failures.
- **Reducing Stress:** If we manage our emotions, we will experience lower stress levels, which helps conserve mental and physical energy, leading to sustained performance over time.

So, which are the common emotional challenges we oftentimes face in high-performance sport?

We face unique emotional challenges that often arise from the high stakes and unpredictable nature of competition. Some common emotional hurdles include:

- **Performance anxiety:** Anxiety is common in high-stakes sports, where the pressure to succeed can become overwhelming. Managing our anxiety is essential to maintain clarity and coordination during competition.
- **Frustration and anger:** Frustration often arises from mistakes, setbacks, or perceived unfairness. While anger can be a powerful motivator, uncontrolled frustration can lead to impulsive actions and errors.
- **Fear of Failure:** Fear of making mistakes or letting down oneself or others can hold us back, impacting our willingness to take necessary risks or fully engage in performance.
- **Emotional Fatigue:** High-performance training and competition are mentally and physically demanding. Emotional fatigue can lead to a lack of motivation and increased sensitivity to stress, making recovery and resilience-building essential.

LET'S PRACTICE!

The groundwork for emotional management in sports begins with understanding, awareness, and training. We can develop greater control over our emotional responses by incorporating the following foundational practices into our routines:

1. **Self-awareness and emotional identification:** The first step to managing emotions is recognizing them. So, it is important that we regularly check in with ourselves to identify what we are feeling and how these emotions might impact our performance.

If you watched the high jump events at the Paris 2024 or Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, you may have noticed Australian Nicola Olyslagers' unique journaling habit, which gained huge media attention during her competitions.

Olyslagers' diary, often referred to as her "Little Book of Gold," serves multiple purposes. She uses it to assess her performance, jotting down technical feedback, motivational quotes, and personal reflections after each jump. For instance, she rates different aspects of her technique, such as her run-up and take-off, often, which helps her identify areas for improvement. This practice keeps her focused and detached from emotional highs and lows during events. Her faith also plays a role, as her entries often include Bible verses and symbols for spiritual encouragement.

She considers the act of writing more significant than the content itself, as it allows her to reset mentally and concentrate on upcoming jumps without carrying residual emotions or thoughts.

Write down in your diary: What is this emotion I am feeling or that I felt during the training session or competition?

It is important that we learn to label these emotions—whether it's frustration, excitement, or nerves.

Keeping a journal of emotions during training and competition can help us identify patterns and triggers. By understanding when certain emotions tend to arise, we can prepare specific strategies to manage those feelings in future situations.

2. Developing emotional regulation techniques: Controlled breathing is one of the most effective tools for emotional regulation. Techniques like the ones we worked on during the WINTER period can quickly calm our mind and the nervous system, helping us manage stress and stay focused.

Keep practicing the breathing exercises that we learnt in the previous chapters.

3. Mindfulness and emotional acceptance: Mindfulness involves focusing on the present moment without judgment. By regularly practicing mindfulness, we learn to observe our thoughts and emotions without reacting to them immediately. This mental discipline allows us to create space between an emotional reaction and our response, improving control. Rather than trying to suppress difficult emotions, we can learn to accept them as natural parts of the competitive experience. By acknowledging emotions without judgment, we prevent emotional buildup and allow feelings to pass more smoothly, preventing them from becoming disruptive.

Keep practicing the mindfulness exercises we learnt during the WINTER period.

4. Cognitive reframing and positive self-talk: Negative self-talk, such as "I'm going to fail" or "I always make mistakes," can intensify stress and hinder performance. Cognitive reframing involves identifying and challenging these negative thoughts, replacing them with balanced or positive alternatives. For example, instead of thinking, "I'm not good enough," we might reframe it as, "I've trained hard, and I'm prepared to give my best effort."

Repeating positive affirmations before and during competition reinforces self-confidence and provides reassurance. Statements like "I am focused and capable" or "I can handle any challenge" help us shift our mindset, preparing us to approach situations with a constructive attitude.

Write down in your notebook five challenges and turn them into positive affirmations.

5. Visualization for emotional preparedness: Visualization can also prepare us emotionally for high-stakes moments. By visualizing ourselves handling stress, frustration, or intense focus, we can mentally prepare for challenging emotions before they arise. We can also visualize positive emotional responses, such as staying calm after a mistake, like David Cal did in that final after a bad start, or remaining focused in the final moments of a competition. This practice familiarizes us with our ideal emotional responses, making them more achievable in real situations.

Find a moment and a place where you can relax and imagine yourself handling stressful and frustrating situations with great emotional control.

Imagine a situation that happened today or recently and visualize yourself managing that situation with calmness.

Developing emotional management skills is most effective when incorporated consistently into training or less important competitions. Therefore, it is important that we start by practicing these strategies during routine workouts or lower-stakes competitions to build comfort and skill. Integrating emotional management exercises regularly helps us make these techniques second nature, so we're ready to apply them automatically in competition.