



DEALING WITH DIFFICULTIES II

THE CHAMPION'S MINDSET

THE FOUR SEASONS OF MENTAL PREPARATION

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The first Olympic Games I followed closely were the Atlanta 1996 Games. While I have memories of watching both the Seoul 1988 and Barcelona 1992 Olympics, I was still quite young at the time to fully grasp the stories, rivalries, and achievements that defined those events. Atlanta marked a turning point, as I was old enough to engage with the narratives, celebrate the victories, and truly appreciate the magnitude of the Games.

Among the countless tales of courage etched into Olympic history, few are as stirring as Kerri Strug's at the 1996 Atlanta Games. Strug, a member of the celebrated "Magnificent Seven," stood on the brink of her sport's ultimate achievement as the U.S. gymnastics team sought its first-ever gold medal in the team competition. The outcome hung by a thread, resting on her final vault.

On her first attempt, disaster struck. Strug landed awkwardly, her ankle giving way, tearing ligaments in a moment that seemed to shatter the dream. Limping and in visible agony, she faced an impossible choice: withdraw, or vault again. Summoning unparalleled resolve, she sprinted down the runway for her second attempt. She soared through the air, twisting and turning with precision, and landed with one foot firmly planted while the other dangled in pain. The instant she raised her arms to salute, she collapsed to the mat.

That vault earned the decisive score, sealing an unprecedented gold for Team USA.

Dealing with difficulties during the WINTER phase can be hard and painful. However, the closer we get to the main competitions of the season the more psychologically challenging things can get. Therefore, preparation to any eventuality is even more important.

High-performance athletes train their bodies and minds for the rigors of competition, yet they are not immune to life's challenges, which can surface at any moment. Setbacks such as injuries, cancellations, or personal losses can disrupt an athlete's pre-competition mindset and performance readiness. Learning to navigate these challenges effectively is crucial to maintaining resilience and mental well-being in high-stakes environments. In the chapter dedicated to this ability, we focused on a Stoic approach. In this chapter we will focus on strategies for managing adversity in a pre-competition setting, helping ourselves to stay composed, adapt, and remain focused despite the circumstances.

These are three of the most common types that athletes in high-performance contexts face occasionally:

1. **Injury:** Physical injuries, ranging from minor strains to serious breaks, can threaten an athlete's ability to compete or train at peak performance levels. Beyond physical pain, injuries often evoke fear of re-injury, frustration, and uncertainty about recovery.
2. **Competition cancellations or schedule changes:** Sudden changes in competition schedules or cancellations due to external factors, such as weather or organizational issues, can leave athletes feeling unprepared, disappointed, or even demotivated.
3. **Personal loss or emotional distress:** Difficult emotional experiences, such as the death of a loved one, relationship challenges, or family issues, can create emotional upheaval that distracts from competition preparation and hinders focus.

Each of these challenges requires a different approach to mental preparation, but all benefit from structured, adaptable mental strategies to help athletes remain composed, resilient, and prepared.

Here are five strategies for dealing with difficulties during the SPRING period:

The following are practical strategies designed to help you navigate life's challenges before a competition.

1. Emotional regulation and acceptance: The aim is to acknowledge and manage emotions constructively, allowing athletes to process difficulties without suppressing or amplifying distress.

How?

- **Emotion labeling:** Name the emotions you're experiencing (e.g., "I'm feeling frustrated and anxious about my injury"). Research suggests that simply identifying emotions can reduce their intensity by helping the brain process them rationally.
- **Acceptance of emotions:** Instead of trying to avoid or change the emotion, practice acceptance. Recognize that it's natural to feel this way under difficult circumstances, which can reduce internal resistance and stress.
- **Compassionate self-talk:** Use phrases like, "It's understandable to feel this way" or "I am doing my best with the situation." This reduces self-criticism, which can intensify emotional distress.

This approach is particularly useful when we face emotional upheaval, such as after a personal loss or an unexpected schedule change. By acknowledging these feelings without judgment, we can prevent emotional distress from becoming overwhelming.

2. Resilience-building through reframing: The objective is to learn to reframe adversity to view it as an opportunity for growth, perspective, or adaptation.

How?

- **Challenge reappraisal:** Rather than viewing the situation solely as a setback, we can ask ourselves, "What can I learn or gain from this experience?" For example, an injury might offer a chance to focus on technique refinement, or a cancellation could present more time for skill improvement.
- **Purpose-based reframing:** We should remind ourselves of the greater purpose or goals beyond the immediate competition.
- **Positive self-talk:** Phrases like, "This is tough, but it's helping me grow stronger mentally," or "I can use this time to improve in other areas" can support a constructive mindset.

This technique shifts focus from what's lost to what can still be gained or strengthened.

3. Visualization and mental imagery for flexibility and resilience: the goal is to use mental imagery to envision successfully coping with the adverse situation and visualize the desired outcome.

How?

- **Adaptive imagery:** We can visualize scenarios where we successfully cope with the setback. For instance, when we are nursing an injury we can mentally rehearse returning to competition with strength and confidence, imagining the steps of recovery as I did after my motorbike accident.
- **Focus on process, not outcome:** Visualize what is within our control rather than focusing solely on results. For example, when we are dealing with cancellation, we can mentally rehearse returning to a focused training session, imagining the steps we will take to improve until the next opportunity.
- **"What If" scenarios:** Visualize how we would respond calmly and confidently to potential challenges builds adaptive resilience.

This approach is especially useful for those of us facing uncertainty, such as an upcoming competition with a recent injury or personal loss. Imagining ourselves effectively handling adversity fosters confidence in our coping skills.

4. Goal adjustment and redefinition: the aim is to adjust goals to match the current reality, helping us to remain motivated and focused despite temporary setbacks.

How?

- **Short-term goal setting:** We should break down our goals into manageable, immediate objectives that align with our current situation. If we are injured, for example, we might set goals focused on rehabilitation milestones rather than peak performance.
- **Flexible goal adjustment:** We have to adopt flexibility in our ambitions. For instance, if a competition is canceled, we might shift focus to personal bests or training metrics that keep us progressing.
- **Process goals Over outcome Goals:** We should reinforce goals that emphasize effort, skill development, or learning over winning or external validation. This will help us retain a sense of purpose and satisfaction in our progress despite external challenges.

This technique will help us to remain engaged and motivated despite reduced access to competition or physical limitations.

5. Mindfulness and grounding techniques for focus and calm: the objective is to use mindfulness to bring us into the present, reducing preoccupation with distressing thoughts and enabling focus on immediate tasks.

How?

- **Breath awareness:** Practicing mindful breathing can reduce anxiety by focusing attention on a simple, controlled activity.
- **Grounding exercises:** Simple grounding techniques—such as noticing five things we can see, four we can touch, three we can hear—can help us center ourselves and redirect focus from distress to the present.
- **Body scan:** Going through a quick body scan to help us release physical tension and cultivate awareness of the moment. We can focus on each body part, noticing sensations without judgment, allowing ourselves to let go of extraneous stress.

These techniques can be especially calming in the moments before competition or after receiving difficult news, as they can help us manage racing thoughts and anxiety.

Resilience in high-performance sports is not simply about avoiding adversity but developing the mental strength and adaptability to face challenges with a composed and focused mindset. Whether dealing with injury, unexpected cancellations, or emotional stress, we can benefit greatly from structured mental strategies that foster acceptance, adaptability, and self-compassion. By integrating these techniques into our routines, we can remain prepared and confident, no matter what difficulties arise on our journey towards excellence and satisfaction.

So,...

LET'S PRACTICE!

Get your notebook and let's create a resilient pre-competition routine for managing adversity and dealing with difficulties.

- 1. Emotional check-in:** Begin with an honest acknowledgment of any emotions or difficulties present, using labeling and self-compassion techniques.
- 2. Goal adjustment:** Reframe or set new goals that reflect the current reality, emphasizing flexibility and process over outcome.
- 3. Grounding and breath-work:** Engage in grounding exercises or mindful breathing to anchor focus in the present.
- 4. Visualization:** Use adaptive imagery to mentally rehearse handling challenges with resilience and focus.
- 5. Reaffirm purpose:** Close with a focus on our broader purpose and reasons for our commitment to the sport, reminding ourselves of the bigger picture.