



# **MINDFULNESS (IN MOVEMENT)**

## **THE CHAMPION'S MINDSET**

**THE FOUR SEASONS OF MENTAL PREPARATION**

# MINDFULNESS (IN MOVEMENT)

Malaika Mihambo, Germany's celebrated long jumper and Olympic gold medalist, exemplifies the seamless union of mental serenity and athletic excellence. For Mihambo, the pressures of elite competition are not merely challenges but opportunities to channel inner calm. Through mindfulness and meditation, she refines her focus, dissolving distractions like mist before the morning sun. Regularly, she immerses herself in mindfulness practices that sharpen her clarity and presence. These rituals become her compass, guiding her to peak performance even amidst the intensity of high-stakes arenas, where grace and precision reign supreme.

This chapter explores mindfulness techniques designed for movement-based practices that support high-performance athletes in grounding their attention, enhancing focus, and stabilizing their mental state before competition. These techniques aim to integrate mindfulness into movement to reduce pre-performance anxiety, foster body awareness, and help athletes enter a flow state more naturally.

The pre-competition period can be particularly challenging for athletes due to the unique demands of mental and physical preparation. Mindfulness practices can serve as an anchor, allowing athletes to stay grounded and focused, and prevent the mind from drifting into unhelpful thought patterns, such as outcome-oriented anxieties or fear of failure. Rather than relying solely on traditional static meditation, mindfulness in movement integrates breath, focus, and body awareness, enabling athletes to maintain a mindful presence as they engage in warm-ups, drills, and other pre-competition routines.

Research on mindfulness in sport has shown that athletes who practice mindfulness report lower levels of anxiety, improved concentration, and enhanced resilience under pressure. This mental fortitude can be critical in the minutes and hours leading up to a performance, helping athletes to handle the inevitable pressure and uncertainty with greater composure.

**Here I present three key concepts of mindfulness in movement:**

1. **Embodied awareness:** An integral component of mindfulness in movement, embodied awareness focuses on tuning into physical sensations, allowing athletes to recognize and accept physical cues of tension, excitement, or relaxation. Athletes learn to become observers of their bodily sensations, noticing tension without attaching to it.
2. **Intentional breathing:** Breath-work helps athletes center themselves and is a powerful way to modulate the nervous system, promoting calm and focus while preparing for intense performance. When combined with movement, breathing exercises allow athletes to synchronize mind and body.
3. **Present-centered attention:** Mindfulness in movement trains athletes to focus on the "here and now" of their actions rather than dwelling on future outcomes or past mistakes. This is particularly valuable for high-performance athletes who benefit from being wholly engaged in each movement, maximizing the efficacy of their physical preparation.

**Which techniques of mindfulness in motion can we use?**

The following are evidence-based mindfulness techniques adapted for high-performance sports settings. Each technique can be incorporated into pre-competition routines or as a standalone mindfulness practice.

1. **Dynamic body scan with movement:** The goal is to embody awareness by moving through a series of gentle, intentional movements, focusing on bodily sensations in real time.

## How?

- Begin with a standing posture. Inhale deeply, feeling the feet grounded.
- Slowly start moving, either with a light stretching routine or low-impact exercises (e.g., high-knee raises, arm swings).
- As each body part moves, direct your attention to the sensations in that specific area. Notice any tension or ease, warmth or coolness, flexibility or resistance.
- Progress from head to toe, taking note of each part's unique sensations. The key is to observe without judgment and avoid forcing any changes in tension or flexibility.

This technique is useful as part of a warm-up routine. It helps us “check in” with our bodies, preparing them for movement with greater awareness.

**2. Breath-synchronized movement:** The aim is to use our breathing as a guide for movement, creating a rhythm between inhalation, exhalation, and movement.

## How?

- Begin in a comfortable stance and start with slow, deep breathing.
- Sync each movement with the breath. For example, as you inhale, reach the arms upward or lengthen the spine; on the exhale, bring the arms down or release tension in the shoulders.
- Continue through a series of warm-up movements (e.g., lunges, squats) or low-intensity drills, allowing the breath to dictate the pace.

We can use this technique before a training session or a competition to establish a steady, controlled rhythm, reinforcing a state of calm readiness.

**3. Mindful pre-competition walkthrough:** The objective is to mentally and physically rehearse movements and sequences, maintaining a mindful focus on each phase of the routine or strategy.

## How?

- Start by visualizing the first actions or movements you will perform in competition. This can be as specific as stepping onto the field or as broad as warming up in the designated area.
- Simulate these movements slowly, focusing on each phase in detail. For instance, a sprint kayaker might go through the motion of the first powerful, fast but controlled strokes, a swimmer might walk through the motion of a dive, or a basketball player might go through free throw mechanics.
- Engage your senses—what does the environment feel like, smell like, or sound like? As you rehearse, maintain focus on the flow of each movement rather than on external outcomes (e.g., winning, points, etc.).

This technique is useful in the final moments before competition, allowing us to feel prepared, grounded, and familiar with the sensations that we will encounter.

**4. Grounding and centering movements:** the goal is to use grounding exercises to help us root ourselves in the present, reducing anxiety by fostering a sense of stability and confidence.

## How?

- Engage in exercises that emphasize the connection between the body and the ground, such as balancing on one leg, squat holds, or low, wide stances.

- With each grounding movement, bring awareness to the body's contact points (e.g., bottom on the seat, feet on the footrest, feet on the floor, etc.). Visualize a sense of energy or stability emanating from these points.
- Repeat a mantra or phrase that reinforces confidence, such as "I am here" or "I am ready," with each grounded movement.

This technique is particularly beneficial for athletes prone to "feel butterflies" before a competition, grounding movements can reduce nervousness by creating a sense of connection to the body and surroundings.

**5. Flow state drills:** The aim is to familiarize the athlete with entering a flow state by practicing drills that involve mindfulness in movement.

### How?

- Select a familiar skill or drill and perform it at a moderate pace, keeping your attention entirely on the movement rather than speed or performance metrics.
- As you go through the drill, use a mental cue like "flow" or "ease" to maintain relaxed attention, noticing each phase of movement fluidly transitioning to the next.
- If you notice your mind wandering, gently bring attention back to the movement without judgment.

Flow state drills are particularly effective in priming us for performance by blending mindfulness with action, enhancing focus and relaxation.

Now...

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*LET'S PRACTICE!*

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**Get your notebook and let's integrate Mindfulness into your pre-competition routine.**

Creating a mindful pre-competition routine can help us build consistency in our mental preparation. Below is an example of how the above techniques can be integrated into a holistic pre-competition routine:

- 1. Warm-Up:** Begin with a Dynamic Body Scan, using low-impact exercises to check in with each part of the body.
- 2. Focus on Breath:** Transition into breath-synchronized movements to establish a rhythm and synchronize mental focus with physical activity.
- 3. Mental Rehearsal:** Engage in a mindful walkthrough of key movements, maintaining presence and sensory awareness.
- 4. Grounding Drills:** Use grounding and centering movements to reinforce a sense of stability.
- 5. Flow Activation:** Conclude with flow state drills, integrating fluid, focused movements to help transition into competitive readiness.