

# MENTAL PREPARATION FOR HOCKEY

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## **Background Information**

### **The Mind**

Hockey is not only a very physically demanding sport; it is also a very mentally demanding sport. Hockey requires players to be focused, motivated, committed, have a positive attitude, and know how to control their emotions. In order for players to perform well, they must be mentally focused.

The mental state of an athlete going into a game or practice directly affects how they will perform on the ice. If an athlete is feeling confident of their abilities, they will be more likely to perform at the levels they desire. However, if a player doubts what they are capable of doing on the ice it's unlikely that they will perform at their best.

The mind and body are connected and at times when the body wants to give up, a player requires a strong mind to tell them to keep going. Players with a strong mind are the ones that are able to keep going during those last few shifts of a close game, and they are the ones that do not allow an opponent to get under their skin during a game.

### **Mental Preparation**

A player's body is not the only thing that needs to be warmed up prior to going on the ice. A player's mind must be warmed up so they will be mentally prepared to play hockey. However, unlike a player's body, the warmup for their mind should begin long before they even get to the arena.

Neglecting to become mentally prepared prior to playing hockey will most likely result in a player being unsatisfied with their performance on the ice. This could result in a decrease in a player's self-confidence and even enjoyment of the game. Prior to stepping on the ice, players and coaches should have a mental game plan regarding a strategy for how they will perform.

There are several ways that a player can get themselves mentally prepared to play hockey. More specifically there are three stages of mental preparation for a player for a game or practice. They are as follows:

1. The Pre-Competition Phase
2. The Competition Phase
3. The Post-Competition Phase

During the *Pre-Competition Phase* the player should be concentrating on the game or practice. Exercises such as visualization (which will be discussed in a later section)

should be used during this phase. The player should be getting themselves into “game mode.” They can do this by:

- Visualizing themselves in the arena.
- Thinking about what they will do during the practice or game.
- Going over tactics for several situations that they may face.
- Concentrating on what they want to accomplish on the ice.

The *Competition Phase* takes place during the game or practice itself. This phase involves the player refocusing on performing to their best of their abilities after a shift or after completing a drill.

The *Post-Competition Phase* is when a player should recap their performance on the ice. They should focus on the positive aspects of their performance and on ways that their performance can be improved upon for next time.

### **Words of Inspiration**

If you think you are beaten, you are  
If you think you dare not, you don't  
If you like to win, but think you can't  
Its almost a cinch you won't.

If you think you'll lose, you are lost  
For out in this world we find  
Success begins with a persons will  
Its all in the state of mind.

If you think you are outclassed, you are  
You've got to think high to rise.  
You've got to be sure of yourself before  
You can ever win a prize.

Life's battles don't always go  
To the stronger or faster human;  
But sooner or later the one who wins  
Is the one who thinks they can.

## **Focus Areas for Players**

There are several things that a player can do to become more mentally prepared before going on the ice. The following outlines some ways that players can mentally do to improve their hockey performance. Each of these areas will be discussed in greater detail later in this document.

- *Set Goals*- Players should set personal goals. They will achieve a greater sense of achievement and increase their self-confidence if they have something to work towards attaining.
- *Master Emotions*- Players should focus on positive emotions and learn how to release negative ones. They should also focus on controlling emotions such as anger and fatigue.
- *Breathing*- By taking deep, relaxing breaths a player can help to calm themselves in stressful or heated moments to enable themselves to think more clearly.
- *Positive Visualization*- Players should create positive images of themselves successfully performing in a game or practice. As a result, they will gain more confidence in their ability to perform in these situations.
- *Winning Attitude*- Players should focus on the positive in situations and turn negative situations into helpful ones.
- *Positive Self-Talk*- Players should provide themselves with positive feedback after a game or practice and acknowledge when they do something well or accomplish a goal.

## **Setting Goals**

Setting goals is essential in improving as a hockey player. Goals create more focus for players by providing them with a specific target to work towards. This causes the player to put their energy towards a focal point instead of spreading it too thinly over too many areas.

Goals not only provide players with a direction to work towards, but they also allow players to feel a sense of accomplishment upon achieving a goal. Yet in order to be of the most assistance to a player, goals should meet the following criteria:

Goals should be *MEASURABLE*. If a goal is not measurable it will be more difficult to tell whether or not the player was able to achieve their goal. An example of an immeasurable goal is “I will play well this game.” Whereas an example of a measurable goal for a goalie is “I will not allow any rebound goals this game.”

Goals should also be *TIME RELATED*. Players should have a specific time frame in mind when setting a goal. Players should set short- and long-term goals to work towards during the season. An example of a long-term goal for a season is to be able to take a slap shot

by the end of the season. An example of a short-term goal is to win 50% of the faceoffs in a certain game. Once a player reaches a goal, they should establish a new one to work towards.

Goals must be *SPECIFIC*. When making a goal, players should try and make their goal as detailed as possible. Sometimes including a quantitative measure in a goal can assist players in making their goal specific. An example of a specific goal is to get 15 points this season.

Goals should be *CHALLENGING* for a player. A player should have to work hard in order to achieve their goals. The harder a player must work at attaining their goal, the more satisfaction and confidence that player will gain upon reaching their goal. An example is setting a goal for next season to make a team one division higher than the division a player is currently playing in.

Goals should be *ACHIEVABLE* for a player. A player should set goals that are challenging but attainable with hard work. If a player sets a goal that is unattainable for them, it will only have a negative impact on them as they will lose self-confidence and faith in themselves as a player. Also, a player may feel that the hard work that goes towards achieving a goal is not worthwhile because it does not always have a positive end result. An example of an achievable goal for a player is to score 10 goals this season when last season they scored 8.

A player's goals should be *SELF-CONTROLLED*. Whether or not a goal is achieved should depend on the player that set that goal. This way circumstances that are not within the player's control cannot prevent a player from achieving their goal. An example of a goal that is within a player's control is to make all passes clean, crisp and accurate during a game.

## **Controlling Emotions**

Hockey is also a very emotional game. Most players are very passionate about hockey and have a lot emotion invested into it. It is great that so many players love the game and that it usually has a positive influence on them when they play. However, there are times that emotions can have a negative impact on a player's performance.

Players must be able to control their emotions when certain situations arise. An athlete with strong emotional control can face stress in a calm, objective manner. If a player is unable to control their emotions, such as fatigue, anger, and pain, then that player will be unable to maintain the right focus during a game or practice. As a result, they will have a poorer performance and may become frustrated and not enjoy themselves.

Being able to control emotions is correlated with proper mental preparation for a player. A mentally prepared player will have more emotional control while playing hockey. Those players that have more control of their emotions are less likely to do something in a game that they may later regret. For example, a player that is able to calm their emotions will be able to walk away from an aggravating situation in a game instead of doing something that may result in a retaliatory penalty and hurt their team.

Taking a deep breath is one of the most effective ways for a player to control their emotions. A deep breath can assist in calming their nerves, which can assist the player in thinking clearly and rationally in stressful or tense situations.

## **Breathing**

Simply taking a deep breath can help a player in numerous ways. Proper breathing can have several positive impacts on a player and their performance on the ice. As aforementioned, breathing is one thing that can assist a player in controlling their emotions. It can help a player to calm down in a very tense situation, improve circulation, and increase blood flow. However, a proper breathing technique must be used. The following exercise instructs players on how to breathe properly.

### *Exercise*

Clear the mind of all distractions. Relax. Breathe in slowly through the nose from the centre of the body (which is behind the belly button) drawing air upwards to fill the lungs. Breathe in for four seconds, hold for two seconds, and then breathe slowly out for four seconds. Repeat 5-10 times.

Players can use this breathing exercise prior to going on the ice to help calm themselves down and gain some focus, during a game or practice, when injured or in pain, when feeling fatigued, and so on. It is a simple exercise that can be very beneficial to players in various situations.

## **Visualization**

Visualization is a technique that can help players to become more confident of their abilities on the ice. With visualization a player actually pictures themselves successfully doing something on the ice. For example, a player can visualize themselves scoring a goal, winning a face off, back checking, winning a battle on the boards, etc. If a player sees themselves being successful in those situations, they will feel more confident in their abilities to do these things on the ice.

The following are several ways that visualization can be used:

- *Mental rehearsal*: it can be used by a player for a precise skill or event.
- *Mental review*: it can be used by a player to recap their past performances on the ice. The player should focus on areas that can be improved upon and turn something negative into a positive by learning from it.
- *Self-affirmation*: it can be used by a player to gain confidence in their abilities on the ice by picturing themselves being successful in various situations.

### *Exercise*

The following is an exercise that can be used to illustrate how influential visualization and the mind can be regarding what a person is physically capable of doing.

1. Stand with your arms by your sides.
2. Bend down and touch your toes.
3. Make a note of how far you can go.
4. Stand up again.
5. Now visualize yourself doing this exercise; close your eyes and picture yourself touching your toes. Imagine yourself reaching much further than you were just able to. Imagine touching your head to your knees.
6. Open your eyes.
7. Bend down and touch your toes again.

Upon completing this exercise most people were able to reach approximately 20% further than they were originally able to.

However, in order for visualization to be most effective, the player should use several of their senses while picturing a situation. For example, the player should visualize the move that they are going to make to score a goal, imagine how the puck will feel on their stick when they release it, and imagine what the arena will sound like when they score.

The more visualization that a player does the better. A player will develop more strength by repeatedly rehearsing a situation in their head. They will be better able to read, anticipate and react in certain situations because they will have predetermined in their head the course of action that they will take in these situations. The following is an example of a visualization exercise that players can use.

### *Exercise*

One suggestion for players is to score 50 mental goals a day. Picture the corner that each puck is going to go in, the type of shot that is going to be used, what the goalie is going to do, etc. By repeatedly visualizing these goals the player will have more confidence in

themselves and know exactly what to do when the chance arises for them to score a goal in a game.

## **Attitude**

The mental state of a player can affect several aspects of their attitude. A positive state of mind results in a positive attitude. A positive attitude allows a player to learn from every situation, creates a better team environment, and allows the player to have more fun. The following are ways that a positive attitude can affect different aspects of a player.

A player's attitude affects their *DRIVE* to play hockey. A positive attitude will increase a player's desire to win, meet their goals, and be successful.

*DETERMINATION* is another thing that can be affected by a player's attitude. With a positive attitude a player will be more persistent, work harder and not give up until their goals are met.

Attitude also affects a player's *LEADERSHIP* abilities. A leader with a positive attitude will be more encouraging of their team and concentrate on motivating their teammates as opposed to concentrating on what the team is doing wrong and bringing down team morale.

The *COACHABILITY* of a player is also affected by their attitude. A positive attitude will make a player more accepting of their coaches' advice and feedback. The player will be able to find the positive in what information they receive from their coach and will be better able to learn from it.

*SELF-CONFIDENCE* can be increased if a player has a positive attitude. This will enable the player to focus on good aspects of their abilities instead on concentrating on mistakes they make or the skills they are lacking. As a result, the player will have more faith in their abilities on the ice.

A positive attitude can help to create *MENTAL TOUGHNESS* for a player. A mentally tough player will be better able to accept constructive criticism from coaches or teammates and will not become as easily frustrated or upset by a poor performance on the ice. They will instead use it in a way that can improve their future performances.

## **Self-Talk**

What a player says to themselves can also have a tremendous impact on their performance on the ice. With positive self-talk a player is more likely to have confidence in what they are able to do on the ice, whereas with negative self-talk a player is more likely to doubt their hockey capabilities. A player reassuring themselves of their abilities on the ice is just as important as a player hearing it from their parents and coaches. If a player doubts their own abilities, it will counteract any positive feedback and reassurance that they hear from others.

Self-talk allows a player to reassure themselves that they are able to do something. It allows them to reason out why they were able or unable to successfully complete something. This creates an opportunity for a player to learn more about themselves and their skills.

The way a player words their self-talk is essential. A player can still express their disappointment in their performance on the ice; however, the way that they express can have a positive or negative impact on their future performances.

### *Examples*

An example of negative self-talk after a poor performance on the ice is if a player says to themselves, "I did not play well. I cannot shoot, pass, or score. I suck." The more the player puts down their performance on the ice, the more they will start to believe that they are a poor hockey player.

An example of positive self-talk after a poor performance on the ice is if a player says to themselves, "I can play better than that. I can make better passes than that and I can score on chances like that. I am going to make sure that I perform as well as I am capable of next time." This allows the player to acknowledge they did not play as well as they are capable of but reassure themselves that they are still a good hockey player.

One thing that affects whether a player's self-talk is positive or negative is the way in which they phrase their questions. If a player phrases a question to themselves in a pessimistic way, they will get a pessimistic answer. For example, if they ask, "how could I have been so dumb as to take that player on that two on one?" The player will most likely receive a response with a similar tone, such as "because you are stupid, and you do not even know where you should position yourself on the ice." As a result, the player will doubt their abilities in future situations that are similar to this.

An example of a positive question is, "what have I learned for the next time I am in that situation on a two on one?" Then the player will most likely answer in a constructive fashion, such as "take away the pass." As a result, the player will have learned what they should do in the future when a similar situation arises, and they will have more confidence in themselves.

## **Tips for Performing Well**

The following are some tips for players to use to help improve their hockey performance.

- Know what needs to be done and work hard towards doing it.
- Remember not to lose confidence when dealing with pressure or making a mistake
- Be prepared
- Practice discipline and control
- Instead of retaliating, skate away
- Always push to be your best
- Even when tired, keep going for that extra mile. It will pay off in the end.
- Focus on solutions instead of complaining
- Do not give up, even when down by two goals

## **Focus Areas for Coaches**

The mental state of a player going into a game or practice is mostly up to that player. However, there are some things that a coach can do to help get their players into a good state of mind before going on the ice. The coach is viewed as a figure of authority to players and as a result they can help or hinder the mental state of players before, during and after going on the ice. The following are areas that coaches can assist players with in achieving a positive state of mind.

- *Goals*- Achieving a goal provides players with a great sense of accomplishment and self-confidence. Coaches play a key role in helping players to set goals as well as in achieving them.
- *Communication*- The way in which coaches communicate with their players has a direct impact on the mental state of a player. It can also affect how much confidence a player has in their abilities on the ice and how much fun the players have.
- *Motivation*- Coaches should help to motivate their players. Players in a positive state of mind will be more motivated than those with a negative state of mind. Therefore, coaches need to keep players thinking positively in order to keep them motivated.

## **Goals**

Goals help to provide players with confidence, motivation, and drive. It is a coach's job to assist their players in meeting their goals. It is essential for a coach to be aware of the goals of each of their players and to help them work towards achieving them. The more people that are aware of players' goals, the more help they will receive in working towards them. Also, players and coaches will be working towards the same thing instead of going in separate directions and conflicting with each other.

Coaches should also assist players in setting goals. Coaches should set goals with each individual player at the start of each season so each player will have something to work towards. Once a goal is achieved, together coaches and players should set a new goal to work towards. Some players will automatically set goals for themselves to work towards, but other players may not. By setting goals with each player, the coach will ensure that each player has outlined something that they would like to achieve. This way the coach will also ensure that each player will be able to feel a sense of accomplishment upon meeting a goal.

Team goals are just as important as individual goals. Coaches and players should set some goals as a team regarding what they would like to achieve as a team for the season. Each player's part in achieving the team goals should then be clearly outlined. This way everyone will know their job and will feel a great sense of accomplishment when a goal is achieved.

## **Communication**

The way in which a coach communicates has a direct affect on the mental state of their players. It can also directly affect how much confidence a player has and whether they have a positive or negative attitude. A coach's communication style can also affect how much fun their players are having at hockey. Therefore, it is essential for coaches to be aware of their own communication style in order to ensure that the players are enjoying themselves.

A coach is required to tell players when they are doing something well and to provide players with constructive criticism so they can further their knowledge about the game of hockey. If a coach praises a player for something they do well, that player will gain more confidence in their abilities on the ice. The way in which a coach provides their players with constructive criticism can also affect the confidence of players. A coach that yells at players and only focuses on the things that players do poorly will make the players feel as though they are unable to do anything right on the ice. Whereas a coach that provides players with constructive criticism reassures players in their abilities by recognizing things that they do right will allow the players to maintain their confidence and to learn something new at the same time.

A coach should be aware of the most effective ways to communicate with each player. Each player has a different personality and as such a different communication style will be most effective for each player. Some players are more sensitive than others and as a result the way a coach communicates with them can have a larger impact on the mental state of that player. Other players do not take constructive criticism as personally and are more open to the feedback that the coach provides. Therefore, it is essential for a coach to be aware of all of this information regarding their players in order to assist their players in performing well.

The place in which a coach communicates also has an impact on the players. When a player is acknowledged for doing something correctly in front of their teammates, it adds confidence to that player. However, when a player is criticized in front of their teammates it makes that player feel incompetent and embarrassed. A coach should be aware of who is present before communicating with a player and only provide that player with feedback if the appropriate people are present.

## **Motivation**

Coaches are responsible for helping to motivate their players. The mental state of a player directly affects how motivated they are. Therefore, a coach must know how to keep players in a positive state of mind to help motivate them. To enhance and maintain motivation, coaches should use the following guidelines:

- Balance challenges with skill. Players require a balance between difficulty and ability. If a challenge is too difficult for a player, they will lose confidence in themselves and as a result lose motivation.
- Encourage players to perform in the present. Encourage players to only think about what is in the immediate present, not past or future outcomes.
- Encourage players to concentrate on a specific target. Set a specific target for the team for each practice or game and remind players to work towards it. They will gain confidence in themselves upon reaching their target.
- Remind players to only concentrate on the aspects of their performance that are controllable. For example, remind them not to get discouraged if they feel a referee is not on their side.
- Make sure the players have fun!