



MENTAL TOUGHNESS FOR
NETBALL:
BETWEEN THE EARS TRAINING
PACKAGE

Created by Leah Fogarty
Between the Ears – Performance Psychologist

In recent years, “Mental Toughness” has become a popular catch-phrase used by athletes, coaches, and the Australian sporting media. More and more athletes and coaches, at all levels of ability, are beginning to realize that mental toughness is one of the most critical psychological attributes in achieving performance excellence in any sport, including netball. It is, therefore, surprising to discover that little is known about it. Recent sport psychology research that has addressed both definition and developmental issues relating to mental toughness has provided promising steps forward in the education, awareness, and training of mental toughness in both coaches and players.

So what exactly is it?

DEFINITIONS

It seems everyone has their own definition of this elusive concept. For example, John Eales, the former Captain of the Australian Rugby Union team (the Wallabies) stated:

“I would define mental toughness as being able to continue the pursuit of your goals irrespective of what's happening around you. If there is one characteristic that, in my eyes, is needed by someone if they want to be a winner, it would be persistence.” (monster.com.au, July 10, 2003)

Steve Waugh (former Australian cricket Captain and champion) recently stated in his autobiography that:

“...mental toughness was not giving in to myself or taking the easy option.”

Loehr (1982, 1986) has been touted as the first researcher who popularised the term mental toughness, claiming that at least 50% of superior athletic performance was attributable to mental factors.

Daniel Teitelbaum, a well known American speaker and columnist who has worked with several well known businesses (e.g. IBM, American Express, Kodak), poetically explained:

“Mental toughness is the ability to keep picking yourself up – no matter what life hits you with – to keep marching steadily forward to achieve the specific victories you have determined that you WILL make happen.” (Teitelbaum, 2003)

From the opinions of 10 international performers, Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton (2002) specifically defined mental toughness as:

“Having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to: *Generally*, cope better than your opponents with the many demands (competition, training, lifestyle) that sport places on a performer. *Specifically*, be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focussed, confident, and in control under pressure”.

Middleton and colleagues (2004) recently criticised this definition by Jones et al., stating that it only described the outcomes of mental toughness, and not the construct itself. Thus, they devised a definition that stated not only what mental toughness is, but also the actions of mental toughness (e.g., perseverance, task focus), in addition to some influencing factors (e.g., self-belief, attitude).

“Mental toughness is defined as an unshakable perseverance conviction towards some goal despite pressure or adversity.”

There are so many definitions and differing examples of mental toughness in the world of sport which makes the task of producing a simple definition of the concept a challenge in itself. Yet, this is probably where the answer lies. Mental toughness seems a personal or sports-specific concept and, thus, this is the best view for individual athletes and teams to take. Therefore, it appears imperative for teams to conduct an open discussion on this topic in order to promote a clear understanding and awareness of it for the individual and/or the team.

Saying this, there are a number of times when mental toughness is obviously apparent in Netball:

- Being able to stick to a demanding training program.
- Being able to come back when you are behind on the scoreboard.
- Playing to the final whistle, regardless.
- Ensuring that your preparation and recovery for games are optimal.
- Being aware when the momentum of the opposition is controlling the game and having the strong belief that your team will regain this control.
- Not allowing negative thoughts influence your game.

What needs to happen is for the team to decide on a definition of mental toughness, to appreciate how it can influence each player and the team, and then set goals and themes that will, ultimately, help achieve their targets. A good starting point in creating a definition for mental toughness is to describe the actions and characteristics of an individual who would be regarded as such.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MENTALLY TOUGH

Each individual has their own perception on what makes an athlete mentally tough and how it is demonstrated. Nevertheless, several researchers have examined and attempted to summarise the essential attributes that make up a mentally tough performer. The most commonly cited hallmarks of these great performers include:

1. *An unshakeable self-belief, regardless of the score or time left in the game.*

Mentally tough athletes believe anything can happen! This relates to overcoming any self-questioning, self-doubt, fear and other self-imposed restrictions. They also believe in their unique personal qualities that make them better than the rest. They refuse to let the negative thoughts that creep into their minds to dominate their attention, as they know that of all the obstacles they will encounter, the toughest they will ever have to negotiate is themselves.

2. *An insatiable desire and determination to learn and succeed.*
Continual growth and development, as well as ambition, are the driving force behind the efforts displayed by the mentally tough. They see each opportunity and challenge as a stepping stone, allowing them to develop into the athlete they ultimately want to become. Hence, they set challenging targets and enforce the discipline to work towards them.
3. *The ability to bounce back from set-backs (resilience and perseverance).*
The never-say-die mindset! Mentally tough competitors possess the ability to persevere. They push on when everything seems against them, and fight on, no matter what the situation. They never allow circumstances to take control of them.
4. *They thrive under pressure and are always competitive (with self and with others).*
Mentally tough competitors really “find their feet” when the going gets tough. They feed off the energy of such an intense situation and their controlled, positive mental approach withstands the pressures of any situation or opposition.
5. *A willingness to take risks.*
The mentally tough have an understanding that any great achievement involves great risks. They acknowledge that the only way to get results is to push themselves outside of their own comfort zone. The satisfaction they receive from any achievement is directly related to how much they laid on the line!
6. *Being able to push the physical and emotional pain boundaries while maintaining technique/effort.*
These athletes have the “go-the-extra-mile” mindset! They never finish short of their targets. If anything, they will tend to push beyond. They are champions who train themselves to control any physical, psychological or emotional factors that may negatively affect their perception of hardships.
7. *The ability to stay in the present moment, despite the performance of others and/or personal/competition issues.*
A mentally tough athlete orients and uses different time frames. They are aware that the only thing they have control over is the here and now, that is, their next pass or shot. They, therefore, understand that it is a waste of energy to worry about what has occurred in the past (e.g. errors made, previous game) or what lies ahead. However, they also appreciate that the energy and effort they put into the present moment will lead them to achieving their desired long term goal (e.g. winning the quarter or game). The key lies in knowing when to do which: present moment focus is for playing; future focus is for planning.
8. *Accepting anxiety/nerves as inevitable and normal.*
Mentally tough athletes realise that nerves are the body’s way of saying “Something big is about to happen and I’m ready for it!” The Fight or Flight response is when the autonomic nervous system is activated (e.g., increased heart rate, breathing, sweating, muscle tension, butterflies in the stomach) in order for the body to be in the best possible state to handle any intense situation. Mentally tough athletes respect this instinctual response and manage the symptoms so as they enhance their performance, rather than hinder it.

9. *Able to maintain a clear and level head, even in a time of crisis.*

Mentally tough individuals have the ability to think clearly, make decisions and keep things in perspective, even after unexpected or uncontrollable events occur (e.g. bad officiating, team is down by 1 in the final 30 seconds of a game, injury). They don't let their emotions override their thoughts, instead they vent their emotions and then objectively assess the situation and adjust their "game plan" to combat the obstacle. They also tend to conduct regular honest assessments of their own performance and take responsibility for their actions, especially when in a performance slump. They understand that by emphasising their strengths, whilst working on areas for improvement, they will overcome any hurdle and ultimately become an even better athlete.

To further investigate the support for these mentally tough characteristics, during the 2003 National Netball League (NNL) season I asked several Melbourne Phoenix players, including former and current Australian players (e.g. Liz Boniello nee Taverner, Bianca Chatfield), to identify 10 netball players, since the inception of the League, who encapsulated mental toughness. The final top five stood as:

1. Sharelle McMahon
2. Liz Ellis
3. Natasha Chokljat
4. Kathryn Harby-Williams
5. Peta Scholz

The Phoenix players were then asked to list certain qualities that these mentally tough players possessed. From their responses, the fundamental characteristics of a mentally tough netball player were identified as:

- **Confidence:** They exude tremendous belief in their own ability through their body language and by displaying certain arrogance on the court.
- **Never-give-up, positive attitude:** The determination of these athletes is the driving force which allows them to achieve their goals, no matter what stands in front of them.
- **Physically intimidating:** As a result of their total commitment to a demanding physical training program they have a physical presence on and off the court.
- **Ability to handle a crisis:** These athletes remain calm and composed under pressure and can always see a way out of any sticky situation.

In 2006 I continued this research by sampling members of the South East Demons, who played in the Western Australian State League Netball Competition, and included current National Netball League athletes. They were also asked to identify 10 netball players, since the inception of the League, who encapsulated mental toughness. Their final top five stood as:

1. Kathryn Harby-Williams
2. Shelley O'Donnell
3. Liz Ellis
4. Sharelle McMahon
5. Simone McKinnis

The sample of Demon girls then completed a shortened version of the Mental Toughness Inventory (MTI; Middleton et al., 2004), which is an extensive instrument that assesses Mental Toughness in regards to the two factors of 'orientation' and 'strategy', with further distinctions emphasising factors as either 'personal characteristics' (e.g. self-belief) or 'actions' (e.g. focussing attention).

In total, 11 specific characteristics of mental toughness were measured, including Self-efficacy, Task Value, Potential, Task Familiarity, Personal Bests, Stress Minimisation, Positivity, Perseverance, Positive Comparison, Task Specific Attention, and Goal Commitment, plus one global factor of mental toughness.

From their responses, the fundamental characteristics of a mentally tough netball player were identified as:

- **Positive Comparison** = For example, "I often gain **confidence** when I see signs that the opposition is not coping well."
 - This was an interesting finding considering that the specific dimension of Self efficacy was not rated high by the girls. That is,

"My belief in myself gets me through difficulties."

One suggested explanation for this surprising result was the lower standard of competition level that these girls were involved in, compared to the Phoenix athletes, as well as possibly their limited netball experience.
- **Personal Bests** = For example, "Trying to do the best that I can is what is important to me."
- **Perseverance** = For example, "When faced with difficulty I keep working at it and won't accept defeat."
- **Goal commitment** = "I am fully committed to achieving the goals I have set myself"

Therefore, it appears that current elite netballers share similar opinions to previous researchers on the essential characteristics that define the mentally tough. To highlight the Mental Toughness Profile for a Netball Player from the results I obtained, it includes the characteristics of:

- Confidence
- Perseverance
- Goal commitment or the focus on personal bests, and
- Ability to handle a crisis.

Since we now have a grasp on some of the specific attributes that make up a mentally tough netball player, let's see how we can develop these traits in the players under your guidance.

In relation to this, I also collected information from both the Phoenix and Demon players on this topic. The Phoenix players suggested three particular strategies:

- Player profiling and goal setting,
 - "Watch a person who shows these mental toughness attributes, then compare them to another person who doesn't have them....see the difference that they can have on performance "
 - "Monitoring and evaluating one self, and improving in specific areas".
- Implementing internal (e.g. pride) and external (e.g. punishment) motivating factors,
 - "Put pressure on all players to give 100% at training, and if not punish them in some way i.e. starting them on the bench."
- "Great deal of practice of pressure situations at training sessions"
 - "Put a player through several different playing environments at training. i.e. have an umpire during a practice match to deliberately pick them up for things constantly and monitor how they react and then work with them on how to best respond."

The Demon players came up with four main strategies, including:

- Effective self-talk and Imagery, which was the most commonly cited.
 - "Train yourself to think of the positives when in difficult situations"
- Goal setting
- Simulated on-court pressure situations at training:
 - "On-court drills where there is extra pressure...extra defenders...time pressure...Decision making drills when fatigued"
- And there was one response that stated:
 - "It's got to do more with your upbringing and your environment than with acquiring it!"

If this is the case, let's look at what you can do as coach to assist the development of these mental toughness characteristics in your charges. Let's start by looking at what you, the coach, the teacher, the director of your own little business, can do in regards to this last point...

"It's got to do more with your upbringing and your environment
than with acquiring it!"