

**USING YOUR HEAD  
TO WRESTLE LIKE A CHAMPION**

*A Wrestler's Workbook For Developing Mental Toughness*

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# INTRODUCTION

In every sport at the highest levels, the very best athletes always say the same things when they're asked about the secrets to their success. You have to develop good mechanics and proper technique. You have to have a solid tactical and strategic understanding of the sport. You have to develop and maintain a superior level of physical strength and conditioning. This is especially true for wrestling which is by far the most physically demanding of all contact sports! Lastly, and surely not least, you have to have your head on straight at crunch time. What this last secret is all about is that if you want to take your skills as far as possible, if you want to wrestle at the next level, then you can't do it by simply just training the physical dimension of this sport. You also have to train mentally. You have to develop the mind of a champion.

Let me put it in simple terms: Do you really want to wrestle to your potential? Do you have some big, scary dreams that you would desperately like to achieve? If so, then your success in this endeavor is at least 95% physical and 5% mental in practice. Simply put, there is no substitute for hard work and perseverance in the pursuit of your wrestling dreams. You have to pay your "physical dues" in practice. There is no physical shortcut to becoming a champion. NONE! However, once you step onto the mat for a match, once you step into the limelight at crunch time, once the pressure of competition is turned way up high in a crucial, closely fought tournament, then your success is now 95% mental and 5% physical. What this means is also simple. When it comes time for that BIG match, whether you aggressively let it all out and compete the way you're capable of, or tentatively hold back and choke depends almost entirely upon what is going on between your ears!

To become a champion on the mat you must consistently train like one. You have to be willing to do whatever it takes physically to get yourself to the next level. There is absolutely no substitute for honest, hard work. Hanging around in front of the tube spilling snacks and soda on your face won't get you there. Cutting corners in your training and consistently dogging it whenever the coach isn't looking won't get you to the next level. You'll never reach your dreams with that kind of training behavior. Success can only become yours when your investment of physical training in practice is honest and solid.

However, once you get into a pressured match or highly visible showcase tournament, the physical side of your sport becomes much less important. In matches, your performance is 95% mental because what goes on "upstairs" determines whether you soar with the eagles or gobble with the turkeys. Your focus of concentration, ability to handle pressure, "reboundability" from mistakes, bad matches, unfair calls and bad breaks, your self-confidence and mental toughness all determine whether all of your hard work, consistent training and skills will pay off in you wrestling the kind of match that you're capable of. Simply put, without having a "good head" on your shoulders, you'll consistently fall short of your goals on the mat.

All too often wrestlers will do what they need to do physically in order to get good. They'll religiously work with a coach, practice long hours on the mat with a training partner, work hard on their defensive and offensive moves, do weight training, study strategy and build up their endurance through sprints and distance running. In practice, their hard work is clearly visible. They wrestle loose and aggressively, using all of their moves and strategically being smart and effective. By match time there's no question that they are physically tough and ready.

However, for a lot of athletes, something happens after warm-up and the start of their match. It's as if they're starring in the re-make of that old movie, Invasion Of The Body Snatchers. During the match, their speed, strength and skills do a disappearing act. Suddenly they're wrestling tight and tentatively. Instead of attacking their opponent, they respond defensively, allowing their opponent to dictate the match. Instead of easily dominating a weaker opponent, they allow this athlete to stay in the match with them. When they have openings they don't take

advantage of them. They look tight and scared. And all the while, they're flooded with self-doubts and nerves!!!

What gives?

To perform your best when it counts the most you need more than just physical preparedness. You also need to be ready mentally. You need to be **MENTALLY TOUGH!**

If you go into your big matches, important tournaments or critical tryouts **HOPING** that you'll wrestle well, **HOPING** that you'll impress the coaches enough to earn a starting position on the varsity, or **HOPING** that you won't embarrass yourself, then you're setting yourself up for some major heartache and disappointment. If you go into matches worried about the size or reputation of your opponent, dwelling on a previous bad match, distracted by a warm-up where you felt "off" or just plain doubting yourself, then you will never wrestle to your potential.

Do **NOT** waste all of your hard physical work and training! Do **NOT** leave your mental toughness to chance. No serious wrestler would ever leave his physical training to chance. That would be totally foolhardy. So why leave such an important component, the mental dimension of your sport out of the equation? Since your focus of concentration and ability to stay relaxed under pressure are absolute keys to performing well, why would you then go into a big match too nervous and focused on all of the wrong things? Well, you wouldn't if you had trained properly! To wrestle like a champion you must systematically develop the mind of a champion. This workbook is designed to help you do just that: **TO THINK AND PERFORM LIKE A WINNER ON THE DAY OF THAT BIG MATCH/TOURNAMENT!**

The techniques, strategies and exercises found in this workbook are **GUARANTEED** to help you stay calm under pressure, concentrate like a winner, avoid psych-outs and intimidation, block out distractions, quickly leave disappointments, bad breaks and mistakes behind you, feel confident, believe in yourself, master last minute negative thinking and self-doubts and much more! If you **WORK** these techniques and **DO** this workbook, then I can confidently guarantee that you will significantly strengthen your level of mental toughness.

If you simply read through this book once, like you would any other book, then you will find what you read to be relatively useless in the long run! Why? Simply because this is a WORKbook, NOT a READbook. I know all the techniques and strategies that you'll find within these pages work. I've borrowed them from elite athletes in and out of your sport through the years. However, in order for you to get them to consistently work for you out on the mat, in order for you to truly build the skills of mental toughness, you must consistently work them just like you would in mastering any other aspect of this sport!



# SO HOW TOUGH ARE YOU?

## *Testing your current level of mental toughness*

So let's begin in the beginning with exactly where you are at mentally as a wrestler. Are you a mental toughness giant, or a 98 lb mental toughness weakling? Let's find out. Take this very simple, mental toughness questionnaire to determine exactly where your mental strengths and weaknesses lie. Having an awareness of your present strengths, and, more important, your weaknesses is the very first important step to developing the mind of a champion. After completing your mental toughness training in this workbook I would then recommend that you retake this same questionnaire later on in the season. This will demonstrate how far you've come mentally and what other work in this area is still needed.

### **A WRESTLER'S MENTAL TOUGHNESS**

#### *Questionnaire (true/false answers)*

#### **HANDLING PRESSURE**

- \_\_\_ 1. I often dread competing in those bigger tournaments
- \_\_\_ 2. I think about my opponent's size, skills or reputation before I step onto the mat

- \_\_\_ 3). Crowd size and specific opponent(s) usually affect my performance negatively
- \_\_\_ 4). I look forward to the big match
- \_\_\_ 5). The tougher the competition, the better my opponent, the happier I am
- \_\_\_ 6. I am inwardly calm and composed before I step out on that mat
- \_\_\_ 7. I worry a lot about getting taken down and/or making mistakes
- \_\_\_ 8. I frequently perform much better in practice than I do in big tournaments
- \_\_\_ 9. I have the ability to calm myself when I'm too nervous
- \_\_\_ 10. I get physically sick before certain challenge matches/tournaments
- \_\_\_ 11. My pre-match self-talk is mostly negative and full of doubts
- \_\_\_ 12. I have trouble trusting my training and skills when it comes time to put it all on the line
- \_\_\_ 13. I seem to wrestle better against weaker opponents
- \_\_\_ 14. Some people on my team would call me a "head case"
- \_\_\_ 15. I love competing when the match gets tight
- \_\_\_ 16. More often than not, I'm too nervous to wrestle to my potential
- \_\_\_ 17. I seem to often worry about losing to teams and opponents who I know we're better than
- \_\_\_ 18. I frequently get sick or injured right before bigger matches/tournaments
- \_\_\_ 19. I'd much rather practice than compete
- \_\_\_ 20. "Choking" under pressure is a close friend of mine
- \_\_\_ 21. I tend to compete better in unimportant tournaments vs. the critical ones
- \_\_\_ 22. I can never seem to make my hard work and extra training pay off

## CONCENTRATION

- \_\_\_ 23. I am easily distracted
- \_\_\_ 24. I often focus on the opponent and his strengths before the start of the match
- \_\_\_ 25. I often think about past poor performances before I step on the mat
- \_\_\_ 26. Once the match starts, I tend to focus too much on what others think of me
- \_\_\_ 27. I think too much when I compete
- \_\_\_ 28. I have the ability to block out negatives & doubts before and during the match
- \_\_\_ 29. I usually only focus on one or two things when I compete
- \_\_\_ 30. I tend to compare myself with my opponents/teammates during a tournament
- \_\_\_ 31. I worry a lot about letting others down
- \_\_\_ 32. I can easily lock my focus on the match as I compete
- \_\_\_ 33. My mind has a tendency to drift too much before and during my competition
- \_\_\_ 34. I focus a lot on the outcome before and during my match
- \_\_\_ 35) If I have a bad warm up, I can't seem to shake it
- \_\_\_ 36. I mentally jump ahead of myself during a match and entertain the "what if's"
- \_\_\_ 37. There are certain opponents that I just can't seem to wrestle well against
- \_\_\_ 38. I tend to get distracted by what others say or do before and during the match

\_\_\_ 39. When I lose my focus, I can quickly bring it back

\_\_\_ 40. When I compete, I mostly don't think

## **HANDLING ADVERSITY**

### ***(Mental Rebounding)***

\_\_\_ 41. I can't seem to shake the disappointment of a mistake or tough loss

\_\_\_ 42. I have certain matches/tournaments during the season where I always seem to perform poorly

\_\_\_ 43. If my first match is bad, the rest of the tournament is usually bad

\_\_\_ 44. I usually believe that feeling off in warm-up will negatively affect my match

\_\_\_ 45. If I make a mistake or miss an opportunity, it stays with me a long time

\_\_\_ 46. Disappointments and failures motivate me to work harder

\_\_\_ 47. I have the ability to quickly let go of my mistakes and losses

\_\_\_ 48. If I get pinned, I can't stop thinking about it

\_\_\_ 49. When a call goes against me and it's unfair, it sticks to me like glue

\_\_\_ 50. I believe that I learn much more from my failures than successes

\_\_\_ 51. Injuries make me want to pack it all up and quit

\_\_\_ 52. If I make several mistakes in a row, I get really discouraged

\_\_\_ 53. Losses and setbacks make me feel like I'll never succeed

\_\_\_ 54. With all my failures I often question why I keep wrestling

\_\_\_ 55. I deliberately use the memory of bad match to push myself harder in practice on a daily basis

- \_\_\_ 56. When the going gets tough, I tend to quit
- \_\_\_ 57. After a loss or bad match, I look for what I can do better next time
- \_\_\_ 58. When bad things happen, I always think, “why me?”
- \_\_\_ 59. If I’ve been outmatched by certain opponents a few times before, I tend to give up too easily when I have to go against them again
- \_\_\_ 60. When I lose, there are usually correctable reasons for it.

## **WINNING ATTITUDE**

- \_\_\_ 61. I tend to see the glass of milk as always “half full”
- \_\_\_ 62. I believe that I can do anything that I set my mind to
- \_\_\_ 63. I build my successes on my failures
- \_\_\_ 64. Other’s negativity always seems to get to me
- \_\_\_ 65. When I perform badly, I tend to make excuses
- \_\_\_ 66. I hate competing in certain venues and against certain teams/  
opponents
- \_\_\_ 67. The more of my teammates I can get to go harder, the better I feel
- \_\_\_ 68. I love being pushed by my coach
- \_\_\_ 69. It really annoys me when my teammates out-perform me in practice or  
matches
- \_\_\_ 70. I like to pace myself through a long practice so I don’t get too tired
- \_\_\_ 71. It really bothers me when I see teammates cut corners
- \_\_\_ 72. My coach would call me a whiner
- \_\_\_ 73. When I wrestle badly at a big tournament, it’s usually the refs, my  
opponent or someone else’s fault

- \_\_\_ 74. "Can't" and "never" aren't words in my vocabulary
- \_\_\_ 75. If I can't be the star, there's no point in trying hard
- \_\_\_ 76. I have an easy time finding things to complain about
- \_\_\_ 77. I am a positive person
- \_\_\_ 78. I tend to get threatened by other's successes
- \_\_\_ 79. I live, "when the going gets tough, the tough get going"
- \_\_\_ 80. If you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything

*Scoring: Score one point for each answer that matches the answer on this scoring key.  
If your answer doesn't match, assign a value of zero.*

### **KEY**

| <i>Handling pressure</i> | <i>Concentration</i> | <i>Handling adversity</i> | <i>Winning attitude</i> |
|--------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. F                     | 23. F                | 41. F                     | 61. T                   |
| 2. F                     | 24. F                | 42. F                     | 62. T                   |
| 3. F                     | 25. F                | 43. F                     | 63. T                   |
| 4. T                     | 26. F                | 44. F                     | 64. F                   |
| 5. T                     | 27. F                | 45. F                     | 65. F                   |
| 6. T                     | 28. T                | 46. T                     | 66. F                   |
| 7. F                     | 29. T                | 47. T                     | 67. T                   |
| 8. F                     | 30. F                | 48. F                     | 68. T                   |
| 9. T                     | 31. F                | 49. F                     | 69. F                   |
| 10. F                    | 32. T                | 50. T                     | 70. F                   |
| 11. F                    | 33. F                | 51. F                     | 71. T                   |
| 12. F                    | 34. F                | 52. F                     | 72. F                   |
| 13. F                    | 35. F                | 53. F                     | 73. F                   |

| <i>Handling pressure</i> | <i>Concentration</i> | <i>Handling adversity</i> | <i>Winning attitude</i> |
|--------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| 14. F                    | 36. F                | 54. F                     | 74. T                   |
| 15. T                    | 37. F                | 55. T                     | 75. F                   |
| 16. F                    | 38. F                | 56. F                     | 76. F                   |
| 17. F                    | 39. T                | 57. T                     | 77. T                   |
| 18. F                    | 40. T                | 58. F                     | 78. F                   |
| 19. F                    |                      | 59. F                     | 79. T                   |
| 20. F                    |                      | 60. T                     | 80. T                   |
| 21. F                    |                      |                           |                         |
| 22. F                    |                      |                           |                         |

## **SCORING**

### *Mental Toughness Questionnaire*

There are a total of 80 possible points that you can get on this little test. If you answer these questions honestly and score between 72-80, then you are mentally tough as nails and should be traveling around the country with me conducting mental toughness workshops. If you score between 64- 71, then you are pretty solid mentally. Scores between 56-63 indicate that you are weak mentally and scores below 55 suggest that your head is definitely getting in the way of your playing.

Examine your answers in each of the four categories listed for directions into which area of mental toughness training you need to work on improving. For example, if you score 14 out of a possible 20 on the “handling pressure” section, it would be very useful for you to spend more time on these techniques in this workbook. Keep in mind that no matter what your score, you can always strengthen your mental toughness muscles and that’s what this training program is all about.





# GETTING STARTED

## STEP #1

### *Developing Awareness*

In order for you to learn to perform your best when it counts the most, you must first develop AWARENESS of what you are currently doing mentally that may very well be getting in your way. You can't correct mistakes and strengthen weaknesses without knowing exactly what these are! For example, if you consistently make tactical and/or technique mistakes during your matches and these are contributing to your poor results, then you won't be able to constructively change these mistakes until you become aware of exactly what you're actually doing wrong that's causing you to come up on the short end, results wise!

You started this process of developing awareness by taking the Mental Toughness Questionnaire. Hopefully this has given you some general ideas of what exactly is getting you into hot water, performance-wise. Now let's get a bit more specific. Remember, without an awareness of your mental mistakes, you'll never be able to begin to build mental toughness. AWARENESS IS YOUR VERY FIRST KEY TO CHANGE.

There are three basic areas that you need to develop an awareness of in order to systematically build mental toughness:

1. SELF-TALK or what I call your "INNER COACH."
2. FOCUS OF CONCENTRATION
3. LEVEL OF PRE-MATCH NERVOUSNESS or EXCITEMENT

## *Developing an awareness of your “inner coach”*

*“Matches are won and lost before the start.”*

Dr. G

Do you know what this statement means? Your pre-match and during-match thoughts or self-talk, that is, the dialogue of what I call your “inner coach” dramatically affects how loose and relaxed you are, how well you are able to handle fatigue, your level of self-confidence and how well you’ll ultimately perform. The wrong kind of “inner coaching” will tighten you up, undercut your confidence, slow you down and get you pinned! So let’s discover just what kind of “inner coach” you have working for you.

### *Discovering the difference between your good & bad matches:*

#### **Exercise:**

#### **PART 1**

#### *“The Inner Coaching of Bad Performances”*

Sit down, close your eyes and mentally review, in as much detail as possible, a previous bad match. Remember where the competition was being held, the arena you wrestled in, who your opponent was, how big the crowd was, what might have been at stake, etc. Specifically, I would like you to “zoom in” on what you were thinking to yourself as you were warming up, right before the match started and then what you were thinking as the match got under way. What kind of “inner coaching” was going on? Next, recall what you were thinking about if your opponent scored on you or if you made a dumb mistake. What went through your mind if you found yourself tentatively holding back instead of aggressively going on the attack? What did you think if you tried to shoot and your attempt was thwarted? What went on in your head if the crowd got on you or a teammate or coach yelled at you? What inner dialogue did you hear if the ref made a questionable call? Take a moment right now to jot down in as much detail as possible the answers to the questions on Worksheet #1, “Self-talk & Bad Performances.” When you’ve finished, answer the very same questions for at least two more bad matches.

Now, compare your answers and see if you can discover a pattern between all of your bad outings. Usually you'll find that right before and during your bad matches, you think very similar kinds of things. Your "inner coaching" is frequently negative, confidence eroding and non-stop. Oftentimes it fills you with dread and raises your anxiety level, making it all but impossible to wrestle the kind of loose, aggressive way that you're capable of.

Purpose: Examining several of your bad matches in this way will help you come to really get to "know" your bad inner coach. Remember, before you can change negative "inner coaching" to positive, you must first become aware of your typical patterns of negativity. Once you get a handle on what you typically say to yourself both before and during your bad matches, you will then be in a much better position to begin to turn this negative coaching around. However, if you have no awareness of the specific ways that you're being negative, then you will continue to bring yourself down without any chance for constructive change.

## **PART 2**

### ***"The Inner Coaching Of Good Performances"***

Next, pick several of your best performances, matches where you were extremely satisfied with how well you wrestled, where you were relaxed, quick, aggressive and "on." Examining them one at a time, vividly review each great performance in relation to your "inner coaching." What were you thinking about before the match began? What were you thinking about while you were warming up? During the first period? What kind of thoughts or self-talk, if any, did you have if your opponent scored on you? When things got tough or stressful what did you think? If you made a mistake, what did you think? If your opponent tried playing head games with you or was deliberately being overly aggressive, what did you "hear" from your inner coach? Write down all of your typical "inner coaching" for each of these good performances and record them on Worksheet #2 "Self-talk & Good Performances." Next, compare all three or four of these good matches to see if there is a pattern of "inner coaching" that accompanies your best performances. If you're anything like most wrestlers out there, then you should be able to discover a consistent pattern here.

### **PART 3**

#### ***“Compare And Contrast”***

Finally, take the self-talk worksheets #1 and #2 that you compiled and compare them. You should begin to see a significant difference in your “inner coaching” between your best and worst performances.

#### ***What does this difference really mean?***

Your awareness of the differences in self-talk between your best and worst matches forms a critical first step in your being able to “retrain” your “inner coach.” For example, if you know the typical self-talk that always seems to accompany your worst performances, as well as the self-talk that goes with your best, then you are in a position to begin to turn the negative around before it leads to another bad match. For example, let’s say that after your opponent scores a good take down you hear things like, “How could you have let that happen!?!?? God, you totally suck!!!! Why is it that you always seem to choke against this guy?” Letting this kind of negative self-talk run uninterrupted in your head will very quickly undermine your confidence, raise your stress level, tighten you up physically and distract you from the match in the moment. This is why it is so critical that you immediately become aware of when your inner coaching turns negative like this so that you can take some steps to neutralize it. Without this awareness, you are doomed to continue to sabotage yourself into wrestling way below your potential.

## STEP 2

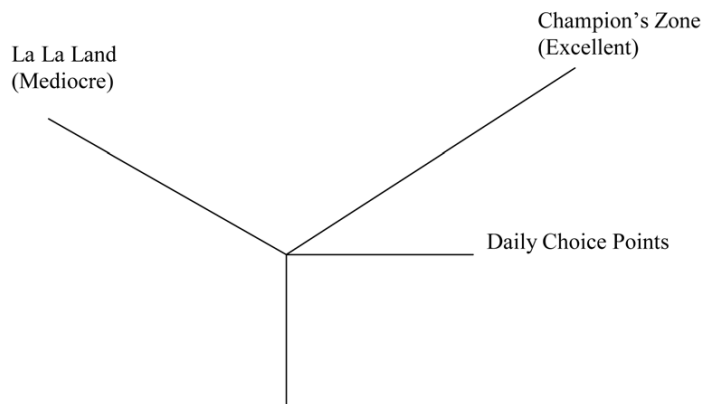
### *Motivation: Taking Your Performance To The Next Level*

So how badly do you want it? Do you really want to take your wrestling to the next level? Are you doing everything possible in your training towards this end or are you inadvertently sabotaging yourself and holding yourself back? In other words, what is the quality of your training like? What kind of an investment are you making in your wrestling future on a daily basis? Are you “depositing” gold bullion whenever you train or are you chocking up a whole bunch of wooden nickels and Monopoly money? Your future success on the mat is almost completely in your hands and depends upon HOW you train.

So let’s start with a very basic question: “DO YOU KNOW WHAT ROAD YOU’RE ON?” You see, every day when you train, you’re on a road just like the one depicted in Figure #1. Everyday that road forks many, many times. And, as an athlete, you have a decision to make many, many times a day. What fork am I going to take? All too often wrestlers make this decision over and over again and have absolutely no awareness of which road they are choosing. As a result, they end up making choices that might not be in their best interests, choices that won’t help them get to their goals.

Let’s look at Fig. #1 more closely. There are basically two different paths that you can follow in relation to wrestling and your life. When you take the left fork enough times, you’ll end up in a “wondrous” place I call “La La Land.” If you get into the habit of taking the left fork, you’ll ultimately achieve “supreme mediocrity.” Simply put, you’ll become unbelievably average! However, when you consistently take the right fork, you will eventually find yourself in “The Champions’ Zone.” The Champions’ Zone is one of those places where you will be stalked by success! It will pounce on you every chance it gets. What do each of these paths actually look like?

Let’s say that you’re at the end of practice, feeling really tired and the coach wants you to run wind sprints. As the sprints begin, you notice that the coach has



stopped watching. You then think to yourself, “I’m whipped! Time to chill,” and then you deliberately slow down. When you do this, whether you know it or not, you have just made a decision to take the left fork. Or perhaps your working with weights and feeling distracted and bored. As a result you deliberately skip some reps and along the way, let your form slip. That decision, every time you make it, helps send you down the left fork. Or maybe your friends want you to go party with them on a night before a big weekend tournament and you know you shouldn’t go, that you need the sleep and you should be resting your legs and body. However, you don’t want to miss out on all of the fun so you go anyway. Guess what road you’re on with that decision? You bet! You’ve just taken that left fork to La La Land again. Then again, let’s say there’s a specific part of your technique that is weak, that needs more work. Your coach gives you plenty of drills to strengthen that weakness, but what fun is it to work on something that you’re not as good at? So you half-heartedly do the drills, not really focusing on that weakness of yours. That decision? Straight down the old left fork!

Now it’s obvious what the right road would be in each of these instances. When you’re in the middle of doing sprints and your body is screaming for mercy, you think, “this is my chance to lift the level of my conditioning and my entire performance,” and so you go even harder. When your doing weight training and you’re bored, you pay very close attention to what you’re doing anyway, completing every rep the way it’s supposed to be done. When your buddies want to stay out late and party you think, “Yeah, it would be really fun to do that, but how I perform this weekend is much more important to me,” and so you apologize to them and don’t go, regardless of all the crap that they might heap on you! When your coach

suggests that you work more on some of the problems in your technique, you think, “I know that this is the one thing that’s really holding me back from becoming an even better wrestler,” and so you put the time into strengthening that weakness.

Let me ask you an obvious question here: Which is the easier road to take? The road to La La Land of course! It takes no character, discipline or special effort to take the left fork, which is exactly why so many wrestlers do so. The right fork to the Champions’ Zone is a far more difficult one. When you go the right way, you end up having to sacrifice. You have to continuously push yourself outside of your comfort zone. The right fork is more frustrating and involves setbacks and failures. **THE ROAD TO THE CHAMPIONS ZONE TAKES MUCH LONGER AND INVOLVES REAL SUFFERING!** So another question readily arises:

Why should anyone in their right mind bother consistently taking the right road? Why put yourself through all that suffering, aggravation and hardship? Isn’t it so much easier just to go down the left fork and not have to work up a sweat.

How you answer this question is absolutely critical for you as an athlete. You can say that you’ll take the right road because it’s more rewarding or it’ll make you feel much better about yourself or you’ll accomplish far more in your life. You can say that with the right road ultimately you’ll become successful. All these answers are true.

However, you’ll take the right fork, the right road for **ONE MAIN REASON! YOU WANT TO!** You’ll take the right road if **YOU** have an emotionally compelling reason to. There has to be something down that right fork that **YOU** really want, that’s really important to **YOU**. You can’t take the right fork because it’s just the right thing to do. You can’t take it because you have a lot of talent and it will please your parents if you do so. You can’t take it for the coaches. You have to do it because **YOU WANT IT!**

In other words you have to have what I call a “**BIG ENOUGH WHY,**” some personal goal, dream or mission that has captured your heart and imagination and provides you with ample enough reason to sacrifice, work hard, and do whatever it takes to become successful. Your **BIG ENOUGH WHY** can be trying to break into the starting line-up on varsity, to win conference or become the #1 wrestler in the

state. Your BIG ENOUGH WHY could even be to compete in college, earn a college scholarship to a D-1 program or even make it to the Olympics!!

With a “BIG ENOUGH WHY” that truly belongs to YOU and no one else, it will be much easier for you to make the right choices when you get to that crossroad. In fact, it’s when you’re at the crossroad and being emotionally pulled down the left fork that you need that “Big Enough Why” the most. If you can consistently remind yourself of why you’re training whenever the going gets really rough, then you’ll get tough and keep on going in the right direction. It’s the thought of your big goal or dream in practice that will help you stay motivated and on track. In fact, you want to be able to consistently ask yourself in practice, “How is what I’m doing today and right now going to help me get to my goal?”

### ***How Is What I’m Doing Today And Right Now Going To Help Me Get To My Goal?***

This question will help you raise the quality and intensity of your training. It will give your practices both a meaning and purpose. It will help you take responsibility for your training and cut down on those times where you just seem to be going through the motions out there. It will help you learn and improve faster. Ultimately, this question will help you turn your wrestling dreams into a reality. You don’t want to be out-to-lunch when you train. Keeping your “BIG WHY” in mind during practice will always insure that you’re not!

Let me tell you a personal story about how my BIG ENOUGH WHY in my sport, tennis was first born. I was a pretty decent athlete with good hand and eye coordination that I had honed on the ping pong table in my basement. When I was 12, I took those skills to the tennis court and began playing against my friends. After a summer of being able to beat up on all of my tennis friends, none of whom had ever played seriously or had formal training, I got it in my head that I should enter a local tournament.

In the first round of this, my very first tournament, I was matched up against a real tennis player, 2 years my senior. In less than 30 minutes he beat me 6-0, 6-0, running me around like I was a wind-up toy, corner to corner, baseline to net and



back. I don't think I even won a point in this mis-"match" and afterwards I looked like I had just been run over by a Mack truck. I was exhausted, soaking wet with sweat, totally disheveled with bloodied knees from the few times I had fallen trying to retrieve some of my opponents shots. My opponent, on the other hand looked like he had just come out for a photo shoot. There wasn't a bead of perspiration anywhere on his face and not a single hair was out of place.

However, there was one thing that I found especially upsetting. I didn't care that I had lost so badly. I didn't care that I hadn't won a point. I didn't even care that I might have looked like an idiot in the process. What I DID care about was that for the entire 28 minutes of this match, he had been making fun of me with a friend who had been watching our match from behind the fence. They were laughing and joking about how badly I played, just loud enough for me to get the gist of what was going on.

I was very small as a 12 year old and had learned the hard way that small people really need to keep their mouths shut. So when I went up to him to shake his hands after the match, he smiled at me, looked me straight in the eyes and said, "That was a great match you just played!" Now, of course, he was being a condescending you-know-what. So as I shook his hand, I thought to myself; "I don't care what it takes....I don't care how long it takes...I don't care how hard I have to work....YOU are MINE!!! I will own you!"

Behold the birth of a BIG ENOUGH WHY, born out of fantasies of revenge and retribution! For the rest of that summer, I played tennis 12 hours a day, every day! When it was raining and most intelligent people were inside, I would hit for hours against a backboard. When school started, I would come home, do my homework and then go to the courts. I even began to take lessons, where I discovered to my great dismay just how bad a tennis player I really was! In the winter when it was too cold to be outside, I'd head to the indoor courts, do my homework and then hit with anyone I could until the placed closed.

One year later, in the very same tournament, I got to play that same condescending player again. This time the match lasted 45 minutes. This time the score was still 6-0, 6-0. And this time, my older and bigger opponent still beat me. After one whole year I had improved so it took him just a little longer to dispatch

me and in this match, I actually won a few points! By this time, my need for revenge had all but disappeared. I had fallen in love with the game and wanted to get as good as I possibly could. Towards this end, I continued to train as if tennis was the very most important thing in my life (which, back then, it actually was!).

The very next July, two years after my original drubbing, I faced this guy for the third time, again in this same local tournament. I beat him 6-1, 6-1, totally frustrating him in the process. From that day on, I indeed owned him and he never got more than a few games from me whenever we played after that!

So let's get back to wrestling for a moment and let me tell you another story of a Big Enough WHY that was told to me by a friend. This is a story about Dan Gable, one of the best wrestlers this country has ever produced and one of the most successful DI wrestling coaches (Iowa) ever. In 1966, Gable set a goal for himself, 6 years in the future, to win a gold medal at the 1972 Munich Olympics.

Gable was determined that he would train twice a day, 7 days a week towards this end. Understand of course that training non-stop, twice a day, every day for any number of years isn't exactly a smart approach because REST IS PART OF TRAINING. Both your mind and body need regular breaks from hard training to rest and recover. Gable however, had other ideas.

Now a question readily arises when you set this kind of goal for yourself that far in the future. How can you motivate yourself to train twice a day, every day, non-stop for 6 years when a lot of days you're tired, sick, injured or just plain bored and want to do something else? Well, what Gable did to motivate himself was quite interesting. He knew that if he were going to successfully reach his goal, there was one athlete in the world between him and that gold medal, a Russian wrestler. Traditionally the Russians have consistently produced the very best wrestlers in the world.

So on the days that Gable did not want to train, when he was sick, too tired, injured or wanted to do something else, he went to his wrestling room anyway. And before he began his workout, he sat down, closed his eyes and imagined in vivid detail this Russian wrestler on the other side of the world, heading to his wrestling room and beginning to train. When Gable got a very clear image of this

guy beginning his training, he got motivated enough to start his own. Why? Because every day that you train, your opponents are training. When you back off or cut corners, they might be going harder and doing more than you!

Now it's the middle of that workout and perhaps you're too tired or bored to continue. You didn't want to really be there to begin with. And on those days, Gable would stop in the middle of his workout, sit down, close his eyes and once again clearly imagine this Russian athlete in the middle of his workout, doubling the intensity of his training. When Gable got a clear image of this, he got motivated to train twice as hard.

And now it's the end of your training session and you're exhausted and can't wait to get in that shower. On those days Gable would finish his workout, towel off and before he headed for the showers, one last time he'd sit down, close his eyes and imagine the Russian wrestler on the other side of the world, finishing his workout and then heading for the showers. When Gable got a clear image of this, you know what he did???

That's right, he went back out onto that mat and trained an additional 20-30 minutes as hard as he could possibly go. Now between 1966 and 1972, Gable injured his knee because he had over-trained...and then in 1972, at the Munich Olympics, Gable faced off against this Russian in the gold medal match and on one bum knee, beat him to win the gold!!!

So just what road are YOU on whenever YOU practice? Are you motivated to head to the Champion's Zone or do your interests lie in exploring the hills and dales of La La Land? Answer the following questions to find out: Use True (T) or False (F) answers.

- \_\_\_ 1. I have a clear "Big Enough Why" in wrestling
- \_\_\_ 2. I think about my big goal at least once or twice a day during practice
- \_\_\_ 3. I am frequently bored in practice and often don't see the point of what I'm doing
- \_\_\_ 4. I have a purpose/something specific that I want to work on in each practice that I attend

- \_\_\_ 5. I frequently have a tough time getting up for practice
- \_\_\_ 6. I usually ease back a bit whenever I get tired in training
- \_\_\_ 7. I regularly put in extra time outside of practice to work on my weaknesses and strengthen my strengths
- \_\_\_ 8. I don't have a specific BIG WHY other than I love this sport and want to get as good as possible
- \_\_\_ 9. My motto is "if it hurts in practice, it's just not worth doing."
- \_\_\_ 10. I don't see the point in practicing hard if I'm never going to be the best..
- \_\_\_ 11. When the going gets rough, I go harder
- \_\_\_ 12. I'd much prefer to hang out with my friends than train
- \_\_\_ 13. I find myself thinking about my wrestling goals outside of practice
- \_\_\_ 14. I can always find something positive to get out of even the most boring of practices
- \_\_\_ 15. I often question why I'm competing in this sport

### *Scoring & Interpretation:*

#### **Key:**

There are a total of 15 points that you can get as a high score. The higher your score, the more directed and motivated you are in your pursuit of the Champion's Zone. Scores between 12 and 15 indicate that you are making excellent use of training and are almost consistently taking the right fork. Scores between 8 and 11 indicate that your motivation is a bit off and you're not getting the most out of practice that you could. Scores between 4 and 7 indicate that you are seriously holding yourself back because of your focus in practice and attitude about your sport. Scores lower than 4 indicate that you are a "tour guide" for La La Land and suggest that you might want to drop wrestling and take up another sport.

#1 - T = 1 point

#6 - F = 1 point

#11 - T = 1 point

#2 - T = 1 "

#7 - T = 1 "

#12 - F = 1 "

#3 - F = 1 "

#8 - T = 1 "

#13 - T = 1 "

#4 - T = 1 "

#9 - F = 1 "

#14 - T = 1 "

#5 - F = 1 "

#10 - F = 1 "

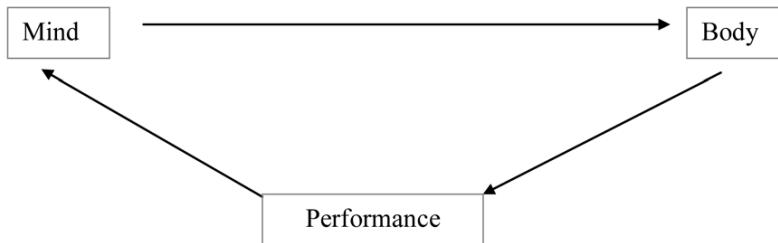
#15 - F = 1 "



## STEP 3

### *Understanding The Mind → Body → Performance Connection*

Matches/tournaments are won and lost before the start because of the interrelationship between your mind, body and performance. In other words, what you think or say to yourself right before and during your matches goes instantly and directly into your body and touches off some subtle physiological changes. These small physical changes, in turn, significantly affect how well you'll perform. (see figure #2).



#### **MIND**

### *What are the wrong things to think or say to yourself before or during a match?*

Take a moment now to carefully review your pre- and during match self-talk for all your bad performances. These represent the WRONG things to be thinking about. For example, "What if I lose? What if I take this shot and it doesn't work? I'm supposed to beat this kid!" "If I don't win this match, our team might lose!" "Last time I faced him I choked!" This guy is really good...what will I do if he does...X,, Y

or Z?” “My dad will be disappointed with me if I don’t wrestle aggressively.” These are all thoughts that will set you up for failure. Why? Because these pre and during match thoughts distract you from the task at hand and worse, make you incredibly NERVOUS!

## **BODY**

### ***What happens in your body when you get nervous?***

First, and big time devastating, your muscles begin to tighten.

Second, your breathing speeds up and gets shallower.

Third, digestion shuts down leaving you feeling nauseous or queasy.

Fourth, your hands and feet get cold as your blood flow is diverted away from the extremities.

Fifth, your heart rate and blood pressure go up.

## **PERFORMANCE**

### ***How is your performance negatively affected by these physical changes?***

TIGHT MUSCLES – Slow your reaction time down; Slow your foot and hand speed down. Cause you to stop moving both offensively and defensively; Shorten your reach and disrupt your feel of your moves; throw you off rhythm and timing-wise; Distract your focus from the moment by moment action within the match; Tire you out quicker; Make you more vulnerable to injuries; Insure that you will feel the pain and fatigue of oxygen debt much more intensely once you get into the later stages of a match/tournament; ALL OF THESE ADDING UP TO YOU WRESTLING TO ONLY A FRACTION OF YOUR POTENTIAL!!!!!!! Competing with tight muscles is like trying to drive a car with the emergency brake engaged! You’ll go NOWHERE fast!

FASTER AND SHALLOWER BREATHING - Tightens your muscles even more; Throws your timing and rhythm further off; Interferes with your normal breathing cycle; Totally and absolutely kills your endurance and makes you feel like you’re completely out of shape; Makes it more difficult to quickly recover from



one move to the next; Further distracts you from maintaining the right focus of concentration; Makes it impossible to think clearly and accurately react to various match situations, ALL OF THESE ADDING UP TO A SUPREMELY AWFUL PERFORMANCE!!!!!!!!!!

COLD HANDS AND FEET – Make it that much more difficult for you to get a good feel of your moves. Wrestling well is all about feel and when your hands get cold, you lose it big time!!!

**Exercise:**

***Using your imagination to demonstrate the mind power of your “inner coach.”***

Try the following exercise to get a “hands on” feel for the power that your “inner coach” can wield. Stand up with your feet shoulder width apart. Take both arms and raise them so that they are perpendicular to your body, shoulder height, palms facing each other and approximately shoulder width apart. Take your left palm and rotate the palm only so that it is facing up. Next, make sure that your right thumb is pointing straight up. Next, close your eyes and imagine, in as much detail as possible that in your left hand you have a very heavy book like a Webster’s unabridged dictionary. Imagine that attached to your right thumb is a string. Attached to that string is a rather large balloon and that balloon is filled with helium, a gas that rises. Repeat to yourself 3 times, very slowly “my left arm is getting heavier and heavier and falling.” Now repeat three times, “my right arm is getting lighter and lighter and rising.” As you do this try to really imagine the book and balloon in your hand and feel their affect. Then a second time, very slowly repeat three times, “my left arm is getting heavier and heavier and falling,” followed very slowly by, “my right arm is getting lighter and lighter and rising.” Finally, slowly repeat these same phrases three more times.

**Purpose:**

What you think right before and during your matches will have a tremendous impact on how you end up feeling physically and emotionally and therefore, how well you’ll perform. Did you notice that your left hand and arm felt much heavier or more tired than the right? If you did, you were able to create a real, physical state (heaviness or tension in that left arm) just by using your imagination. So just what

kind of “inner coaching” have you been providing yourself? Are you programming things into your head that get you to reach higher and achieve your goals like that right arm? Or, like the left arm, is your “inner coaching” weighing you down and spoiling your performances?

For example, are you telling yourself positive stuff like: “I’ve always wrestled well in this tournament,” “I feel good today,” “I had a good warm-up and I feel strong,” “This is going to be a great match!” “I know exactly what I need to do to get the job done!,” “I’m in excellent condition!” Or, are you telling yourself negative stuff like: “I’ve never competed well in this tournament!” “I know I should easily beat this guy but what if I choke?” “This referee is against me!” “I hope I don’t lose again!” “I’m going to get pinned, I can just feel it!” “What if I go out there and hold back again?!!”

## STEP 4

### *Changing Negative Inner Coaching To Positive*

If you don't already know it just yet, NOTHING GOOD EVER COMES FROM BEING NEGATIVE! NOTHING! When you consistently put yourself down after an mistake or bad match, or continually catch yourself doing things wrong, then the only "good" you'll do for yourself is to kill your self-confidence and tighten your muscles. I don't have to tell you that there's nothing positive in being negative in that way!!!! Imagine that you're behind in a huge match with time running out. Tell me, how will being negative and down on your situation help you to come back and win? That's a Duhhhh! You know it won't! Being negative in this situation will only serve to end the match that much quicker! You can only erase a deficit and come back by maintaining a positive, never-say-die attitude. Simply put, you have to learn to systematically retrain your "inner coach" so that he becomes more positive and supportive. Here's how:

#### ***#1 Keeping a negativity log***

Spend at least one week as an "investigative reporter." Who are you going to investigate? YOU and your negative "inner coach." Each night, jot down all the negative things that you said to yourself that day both at school and at practice. As you got ready for practice, what negatives did you feed yourself? As you went through your stretching and warm-up drills, what negatives were bopping around "upstairs?" When you messed up or got taken down, what comments did your inner coach make? If your coach got angry or frustrated with you for something, what was the response from that inner critic? Without editing or attempting to "be positive," try to allow these typical negative thoughts to flow. However, be sure to sit down that very night and record each and every one of these negative thoughts. You may be surprised to find that just by deliberately paying attention to how negative you are for an entire week, you'll actually begin to naturally cut down on some of this.

## ***#2 Using a “victory log” to break the negativity habit***

After spending some time getting to really “know” your “negative inner coach,” let’s start to train a more positive one. Negativity is nothing more than a bad habit. For most of us it’s much easier and more familiar to be negative than it is to be positive. Right NOW it’s time to stop giving in to this self-destructive temptation! Starting today, I want you to keep a journal of all your small “victories.” Whatever you did that day that was even a little positive should get recorded. For example, if you normally hold yourself back during wind sprints or distance running and instead you went all out, then record that. If you have a tendency to avoid working on your weaknesses and today you specifically did some work on some of your vulnerabilities, then record that too. If your concentration is typically all over the place in practice yet today you managed to keep bringing your focus back to the right task, then record that as well! If the coach said something positive to you about your effort, attitude, focus or moves, then that should get in there too. As you look for these small victories, it is critical that you IGNORE that negative part of you that may be saying, “Ohhh, isn’t that cute, you actually managed to resemble a wrestler for 15 seconds!” DON’T CENSOR THE POSITIVE! NO VICTORY IS TOO SMALL.

### ***When will you need your “victory log?”***

You should spend time daily recording at least 10-15 little victories. If you come up with more, GREAT! Your victory log will provide you with a helpful perspective when things aren’t going well. Whenever wrestlers go through rough patches in their training or slumps in their career, they tend to forget that they ever accomplished anything positive. It’s during these tougher times that your victory log will provide you with a much needed, more positive perspective.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Use your victory log daily for at least 30 days. Turning a bad habit around and developing a new one usually takes about a month. However, my suggestion is that you get in the habit of using your victory log as a regular part of your training all year long. It will only take you a few minutes every evening to make your entries and this small investment of time will pay off huge dividends later.

## ***#3 Eliminate the “C” word to build confidence***

The biggest confidence drain to your competitive performance is COMPARISON. When you compare yourself to teammates or opponents right before that big

challenge match or critical tournament you will be setting yourself up for failure big time! When you play the “comparison game” you’ll ALWAYS lose! First of all, what others are doing is TOTALLY irrelevant to what YOU are doing, even in this contact sport. I say that because if you execute the way that you’re trained, then it won’t much matter what you’re opponent does. Second, comparisons ignore or discount your strengths, accomplishments and unique gifts. Third, the athlete who compares himself to a teammate or opponent is most often using the worst part of his imagination to evaluate himself. Why? Because our internal view of a teammate or opponent is usually skewed so that he always looks much quicker, stronger or more skilled than we do. Think about YOU and YOUR training. Think about YOUR strengths and YOUR moves. Forget about what your teammates or opponents are doing. In the end, they are basically irrelevant to you, your goals and how well you’ll perform. To help you blow the whistle on comparisons and end this confidence killing habit, spend a week or two logging your comparison thoughts on paper. Like with the “negativity journal,” keep a record of all your comparison thoughts at matches, tournaments, tryouts, practices and in school. You may be completely surprised to finally become aware of just how much comparing you’re currently doing. Remember, AWARENESS is the very first step to change. To be able to put an end to the comparison habit you want to become exquisitely aware of exactly how and how often you’re doing it.

#### **#4 “*Make lemonade*”**

“When life gives you lemons, make lemonade out of them!” This old adage instructs you to take the bad things that happen to you during your wrestling career and “reframe” them in a more positive way. When you get in the habit of looking for the solution in the problem, sooner or later you’ll discover that you’ll get much further as an athlete and individual. Dwelling on problems will always keep you stuck in them. Reframing these same problems by looking for solutions will get you back on track and in the fast lane again. Examples of reframes: Your teammate and best friend is consistently beating you and it’s starting to make you upset. Reframe = My friend is challenging me to work harder and rededicate myself to my wrestling. This is a wonderful opportunity for me to get that much better. My opponent is a D-I recruit and I’m feeling totally intimidated having to face him. Reframe = This is another wonderful opportunity for me to work on keeping my composure and

concentration, and to get a chance to practice competing at the next level like I want to! Your team has to wrestle against the defending State Champs and everyone is feeling psyched out. Reframe = This is yet another opportunity to both challenge myself and lift the level of my performance because a better opponent can always teach you far more than a weaker one. You had a disappointing tournament where you lost most of your matches because you weren't aggressive enough and you're starting to get down on yourself. Reframe = You learn more from failures than you do from successes. I know I really need to work on my weakness of getting too nervous and tight under pressure so I can trust and go with my attacking moves more.

### **Exercise:**

Take the following problems and reframe them, and then begin practicing this mental skill on a daily basis:

***You have never beaten this team/opponent before.***

Reframe = \_\_\_\_\_

***Large crowd with college coaches watching.***

Reframe = \_\_\_\_\_

***You have to compete against a team of notorious trash talkers.***

Reframe = \_\_\_\_\_

***You have to compete in an arena you don't like.***

Reframe = \_\_\_\_\_

***You have a must win match and you're suddenly afraid of choking.***

Reframe = \_\_\_\_\_

***You feel like you didn't get enough time to properly warm up.***

Reframe = \_\_\_\_\_

***A teammate/opponent who you've always beaten is now starting to beat you.***

Reframe = \_\_\_\_\_

***In practice, the coach seems to be harder on you than everyone else.***

Reframe = \_\_\_\_\_

## ***#5 Turn negatives into positives***

Negativity is a nasty habit that will undercut your confidence and sabotage your performance. It is always in your best interests as an athlete to begin to develop the much better habit of being positive. Understand that NOTHING GOOD COMES FROM BEING NEGATIVE! When you hear your negative self speaking up in practice or the week leading up to a big match or crucial tournament, don't take him seriously enough to listen. Instead get in the habit of substituting 4- 5 positive things. Imagine how you would end up feeling if every time you had a negative thought, it was instantly followed by 4- 5 positive ones. For example, "He's much too good a wrestler for me to beat!" can be followed by: "He may be strong and have good, quick moves, but I've been wrestling consistently well for the last several months, I am just as quick and am much stronger than I was last year! Plus, I'm in unbelievable condition and can wear him out!" Remember, when you first try to turn negatives into positives, you can count on part of you NOT believing the positive messages. Understand that it is NOT important whether you believe these positives in the beginning. It is only important that you get in the habit of immediately replacing any and all negatives with 4-5 positive thoughts. It also doesn't matter if some of your positive thoughts are on the humorous side. For example: "We've never beaten these guys before" can be followed by: "I absolutely love this sport, the better the opponent, the more fun! My mental training has been going really well and I think that as good as this guy is I'm facing, he's a real head case. And let's not forget how stylish we all look in our new team duds!!!"

### **Exercise:**

At home, take 4 of your typical pre-match/tournament negative thoughts and for each negative statement, come up with 4-5 positive thoughts. Remember, you don't necessarily have to believe these positive statements in the beginning. If you keep using this strategy of turning a negative thought into multiple positive ones, within a few short weeks you'll find yourself in the habit of being positive.

## ***#6 Using affirmations***

Another powerful tool for systematically turning around a negative attitude and building confidence (IN BETWEEN MATCHES) is by getting in the habit of using AFFIRMATIONS. An affirmation is a POSITIVE STATEMENT THAT YOU MAKE ABOUT YOURSELF AS IF IT IS TRUE RIGHT NOW. For example, if you consistently get upset

with yourself whenever you make a make a mistake or lose, your affirmation might be, “I quickly and easily let go of my mistakes and disappointments.” If you tend to get much too nervous before your bigger matches, your affirmation might be, “I’m cool and calm in the clutch. The bigger the match, the better I wrestle.” If you tend to be negative under pressure then your affirmation could be, “I stay positive NO MATTER WHAT!” If you tend to run out of gas later in your matches, your affirmation can be, “As the match gets longer, I get stronger!”

When used correctly, affirmations form powerful bridges between how you feel NOW and how you would like to feel in the FUTURE. Your affirmations should be written on index cards and posted all around your room so that you see them continuously throughout the day. Carry some in your schoolbooks. Put some in your locker. Have some in your equipment bag. Like positive statements, it is not necessary that you believe your affirmations in the beginning. It is only important that you make a point out of looking at these positive statements over and over again throughout the day.

### ***#7 Affirmations and the presleep technique***

One effective way to get your affirmations into your unconscious and muscle memory is to use the “pre-sleep technique.” Take one particular affirmation that you’re working on at the moment, i.e. “As the match gets longer, I get stronger!” and repeat it to yourself slowly as you lie in bed at night with the lights off. After the first repetition, try to imagine, in as much detail as possible, experiencing yourself doing just that, being in a grueling, physically challenging match and maintaining your focus, composure and endurance. Slowly repeat your affirmation a second time, once again imagining yourself staying focused and composed under this specific situation. Continue this sequence of slowly repeating your affirmation with the accompanying imagery a total of 15 - 20 times before you fall asleep. If you find that you only get through 10 repetitions before sleep overtakes you, don’t worry. Continue this technique every night before bed.

### ***#8 Mastering last minute negative thoughts and self-doubts***

Far too many wrestlers get knocked off balance before and during their matches by last minute negative thoughts and self-doubts. They get “emotionally hijacked” so-to-speak by these negatives, letting their fears and worries run away with their



confidence, focus and, as a consequence, good play.

IT IS ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL FOR YOU TO UNDERSTAND THAT YOU CAN STILL HAVE THE MATCH OF YOUR LIFE EVEN IF YOU ARE FLOODED BY LAST MINUTE DOUBTS OR NEGATIVITY! How is this possible?

First, you must understand that LAST MINUTE DOUBTS AND NEGATIVE THINKING ARE ABSOLUTELY NORMAL. Even the very best wrestlers in the world sometimes entertain these thoughts right before or even during their big performances. However, they have figured out that YOU CAN STILL PERFORM TO YOUR POTENTIAL WITH LAST MINUTE NEGATIVES BOPPING AROUND INSIDE YOUR CRANIUM. The trick is not to allow yourself to get caught up with them. How do you do this? You must train yourself to use the negative thinking and self-doubts as neutral signals to simply RELAX AND REFOCUS ON THE TASK AT HAND. For example, if you're ready for the match to start and you hear yourself thinking, "what if I can't beat this guy?" or "what if I choke?", you want to quickly and calmly shift your focus back to what you might normally be doing right before your match, i.e. stretching, warming up, etc. If you're about to assume the bottom position and you hear, "You're not going to be able to escape, you're going to get pinned!," you want to notice the thought and quickly and calmly return your focus to setting up the right way and focusing on the moment.

THIS IS ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL FOR PEAK PERFORMANCE UNDER PRESSURE!!!!

At crunch time you NEVER, EVER want to engage, debate or fight with the negative thoughts and doubts. At match time you don't even want to try to be positive! That's right! When you're on the mat in a must-win situation, you don't ever want to try to turn your negative thoughts around into positives! Why? If you start thinking, "I'm being negative, I've got to be positive" then YOU ARE THINKING and, as a result, you will immediately distract yourself from the important cues that instinctively come to you during the heat of the match. You can't wrestle at your best by thinking or coaching yourself through the match. You have to let go of mistakes, points scored against you, and questionable calls by the ref. Performing like a champion is all about relaxing and trusting your instincts and your trained skills. Therefore any time your mind is throwing out negatives, you want to notice them in a relaxed manner and then immediately shift your focus to what is

happening on the mat in that very moment!

Here's a metaphor for dealing with any assault by negative thinking and self-doubts. When these last minute negatives begin to "attack" you, you want to respond as if you were an Aikido master. Aikido is a "soft" martial art where the practitioner meets an assault by utilizing the attacker's own force and momentum to effortlessly neutralize him. The fighter skilled in Aikido may, for example, quickly slip to one side, grab his attacker's wrist and twist it in just such a way as to completely and immediately render his assailant powerless. Rather than letting yourself get caught up in fighting with your own negativity, you want to effortlessly side step those thoughts by **REFOCUSING ON THE TASK AT HAND**. If the negatives persist, then again, refocus without emotionally engaging them.

Let me give you a specific example of exactly what I'm talking about by not engaging your negative thinking while you're in the middle of a match:

Let's say that I'm about to start the last period and I desperately need some points to pull this match out. As I get ready to start, I hear a little voice in my head, my conscious mind saying, "You're gonna lose! You're not gonna be able to pull this out unless you start shooting! You have to get off your lazy butt and be aggressive and I don't think you can do it!" Now I have three options here, the first two demonstrate what you don't want to do, engaging the negative thinking by fighting it with more positive thoughts. The third option demonstrates what I mean by using the thinking as a neutral signal to relax and refocus.

### ***Engaging thinking #1***

I very quickly try to "be positive" and counter the negative thoughts. I try to pump myself up, "You can do this! You're better than this guy! You have the skills! Just start to use them! Go for a takedown to his left and then shoot to his right leg!" By fighting with my inner negative chatter in this way, by trying to consciously coach myself in this situation, I end up physically tightening up my hands, arms and legs, resulting in slower reaction times and forced, uncoordinated moves.

### ***Engaging thinking #2***

I "listen" to the worries in my head and respond by getting even more tight and tentative, thinking, "Oh God! What if I do lose to this guy? What will people say

about me? I have to make sure I don't lose!" Unfortunately this internal response leaves me more nervous and physically tight, causing me to be even more passive and tentative.

Using negative thinking as a neutral signal to relax and refocus – I hear the thoughts, let them go, relax and immediately refocus my concentration on my target and what's going on in this moment of the match.

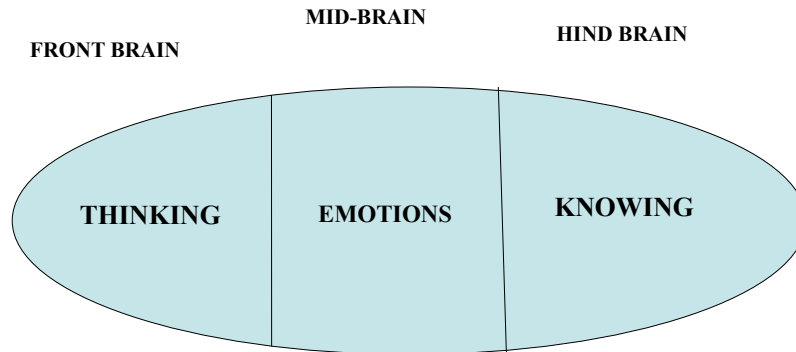
### **#9 Use humor**

Another strategy you might try (only use before a match, in between matches or anytime you have long breaks in the action. For example, the days leading up to a big tournament, the night before or a few hours before your first match) is to greet your typical negative thoughts and doubts with humor. For example, right before that all important challenge match you hear, "you're going to blow it, I can just feel it! You're going to choke your guts out and lose to him." Instead of engaging those thoughts by thinking, "NO I'm NOT!" or "Stop thinking that! That's being negative. I have to be positive!" you might quickly think "Gee, that was really helpful! Thanks so much for sharing" or "A thought for you my little friend. I'm just about to wrestle so perhaps you might want to get yourself a beverage and a snack, and I'll chat with you when I'm done!" When you use humor on yourself in response to these last minute negatives, you neutralize the emotional reaction so common to them and therefore you end up staying calm and relaxed, both of which are absolutely critical to your performing your best when it counts the most.

i.e. Neg. thoughts → self-doubts → increased nervousness → increased worry  
→ increased self-doubts → tight muscles → distracted focus → choking & poor performance

Neg. thought → self-doubts → "it's normal...thanks for sharing, catch you later"  
→ refocus → relax → great performance

## HUMAN BRAIN



### *Your Brain And Peak Performance*

While we're on this topic of thinking, it is absolutely critical that you as an athlete understand that one of the main differences between wrestling your best and choking your guts out lies in the part of the brain that you're in as you perform. That is, when you're at your best, in the "zone," you are functioning from your HIND BRAIN and when you struggle, performance-wise, you're stuck in your FRONT BRAIN. Let me explain:

As you can see in this side view depicting the human brain, it's broken into three parts: The FRONT BRAIN; MID-BRAIN; and HIND BRAIN. Each part of your brain controls different functioning in your life, on and off the mat. The FRONT BRAIN's job is THINKING. If you are thinking about how good your opponent is before the match, reviewing all of his strengths and moves and thinking about what you need to do to counter them, yelling at yourself for making a mistake or reminding yourself about what you need to do to technically correct that mistake, then you are in your FRONT BRAIN because our front brain controls THINKING.

The MID-BRAIN controls EMOTIONS and the HIND BRAIN controls KNOWING. The "knowing" that I'm talking about here isn't IQ or intellectual knowledge. It's the knowing that comes from doing, the knowing that comes from experience. For

example, you know how to walk, talk, ride a bike, etc. All of the things that you have been doing over and over again for a long time get turned over to the control of your Hind Brain.

To understand the difference between when you wrestle well and when you struggle, between your best and worst performances, we're going to briefly look at how your FRONT BRAIN and HIND BRAIN work or "process" information. We will leave the MID-BRAIN out of this discussion.

| <b>FRONT BRAIN</b>   | <b>HIND BRAIN</b>      |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| conscious            | unconscious            |
| uses words/sentences | images & muscle memory |
| analytical           | coordinates the whole  |
| judgmental           | non-judgmental         |
| extremely slow       | instantaneous          |

The above table depicts the processing differences between your FRONT and HIND brains. Let me explain this in understandable English. When you are in your FRONT BRAIN and THINKING, this part of your brain processes things CONSCIOUSLY. All this means is that when you are in your Front Brain, you are AWARE of the processing because you can hear yourself thinking. For example, after you make a stupid mistake and your opponent capitalizes on it by taking you down, you can hear yourself thinking, "God! How could you have done that! What is wrong with you?!!! If you lose this match, you suck!"

Front Brain processing USES WORDS AND SENTENCES. We think in words and sentences, one sentence after another in a linear fashion. This is the language of your Front Brain. Front Brain processing is ANALYTICAL. That is, your front brain tends to break things down into component pieces. It would be like having a coach instructing you as to the basics as you get ready to compete. "OK, now you have to wrestle smart. You have to be quick. When you see your shot, you can't hesitate! You have to take it! You also have to watch out for his best move, etc." Front Brain processing is like having a 100 piece puzzle in front of you, but you only see one piece at a time, separate from all the other pieces.

Front Brain processing is JUDGMENTAL. That is, your Front Brain is a critic who is continually evaluating you. i.e. “How could you have let him pin you??!! That was embarrassing!” “Wonderful match, Choke-O! I just loved how you let him dictate the entire time! What is wrong with you?” etc.

Because your Front Brain processes this way, consciously, using words and sentences, and breaking things down into their component pieces, Front Brain processing is WICKED SLOW!!!! That is, you can only process as fast as you can think, one sentence after another. Imagine trying to shoot at your opponent’s leg while simultaneously trying to coach yourself through all the technical things that you must do in order to effectively execute your shot and the next move! You wouldn’t get one word out in the first instructional sentence before you discovered that your opponent had quickly and easily turned the table on you!

Now let’s look at how your Hind Brain works. HIND BRAIN processing goes on UNCONSCIOUSLY. That is, when you’re in your Hind Brain you are NOT AWARE of it. When you walk down the street, you don’t think about your walking technique or whether you’re lifting your knees high enough! When you make a reflex defensive counter to an opponent’s attack, you don’t think about how to do it. You JUST REACT and your reaction is totally outside of your conscious awareness.

Hind Brain processing uses IMAGES AND MUSCLE MEMORY. The language of your Hind Brain consists of pictures and body feel. Muscle memory is what you develop as an athlete from hours upon hours of practicing the same skills and movements over and over again.

Hind Brain processing is the opposite of analytical. Instead of breaking things down into their component pieces, your Hind Brain takes all the pieces and COORDINATES THEM INTO A WHOLE. Everything that goes into executing a perfect take-down and then pinning your opponent, the timing, coordination, reflexes, body control and quickness all get handled by your Hind Brain. It’s my 100 piece puzzle, only this time your eyes are drawn to the finished picture and not the individual pieces.

Hind Brain Processing is NON-JUDGMENTAL. You either do something or not, without any evaluation or criticism. Because your Hind Brain processes this way, unconsciously using images and muscle memory and coordinating things into a whole, Hind Brain processing is INSTANTANEOUS. That is, your Hind Brain has the

ability to process unbelievably complex information in a split second!

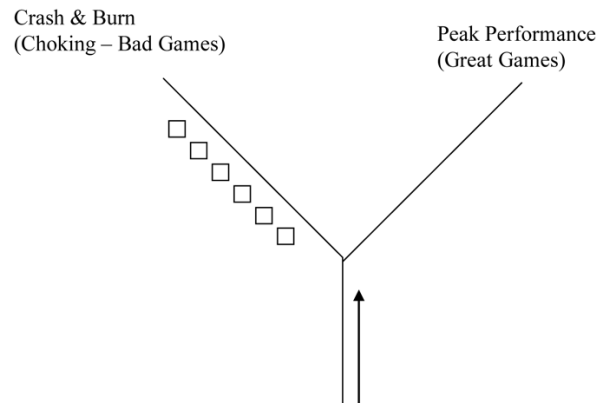
Based upon what we're saying here, which part of your brain do you want on the mat when the match starts? That's right, the Hind Brain! Your Hind Brain wrestles like an Olympian! He is quick, smooth, loose and talented. Your Hind Brain is where all of your wrestling skills lie. Your Front Brain, on the other hand is a hopeless, uncoordinated dufus!!! He is far too slow and inept to keep up with the complexity and speed of this sport. If you put your Front Brain on the mat, he wouldn't have clue one about stance, positioning, technique or how to execute because when it comes to athletic performance in a match, your Front Brain is a wrestling idiot!!!!!!

So if you go out onto the mat in a tournament and you try to think or instruct your way through it, try to coach yourself or continually evaluate/criticize your performance, then you are allowing "the idiot" to take over! The time to think is NEVER DURING A MATCH! NEVER! Thinking takes up way too much time and distracts you from focusing on the moment by moment action of the match. It's within this moment by moment action that your Hind Brain and muscle memory find the necessary cues to execute flawlessly.

This is not to say that you never want to use your Front Brain. There are times that you want to evaluate your technique and execution. There are times you want to break down what you're doing into pieces and analyze what works and what doesn't. However, you don't EVER want to do this while you are competing. Instead, you should save the analysis for practice, long after the matches are over. In addition, it's fine and even necessary to be in your Front Brain when you are learning new technique, skills or strategies. Remember, your Hind Brain takes over things that you already know. When you first learn new things, you don't know. Therefore you must go through your Front Brain first in the learning process before your Hind Brain can take over.

This is why it is absolutely critical that when you compete, you keep your focus on what you're doing in the moment and not on thinking your way through the match and what you should be doing. This is why you don't want to engage or argue with negative thinking or last minute self-doubts right before or during a match. Instead, notice that they're there and quickly allow your focus to go back to the

action and what is going on in the moment. In the next chapter we will talk more specifically about exactly how to do this!



### ***#10 Know the “signs” - the road to crash & burn***

Imagine that you are driving down “X,” a road mapped out in figure #5. You are in a hurry and don’t know the area. Suddenly several hundred yards ahead you see a fork in the road. You desperately look for a place to stop for directions because you have absolutely no clue which fork you should take. Unfortunately, there are no signs of intelligent life anywhere so you pull over to the side of the road, stop the car and get out. You start walking towards the fork and that’s when you see it. At first you’re a little embarrassed that you missed it, because there, right by the left fork is a sign that says, “Dead End.” You chuckle to yourself as you get back in the car, turn on the ignition, put it in drive and step on the gas. When you get to the intersection you turn the wheel sharply to the left and go down the wrong road. A little further down the road there’s another sign that says, “Road ends, 2 miles.” You smile to yourself and step on the gas. Soon you come to another sign that says, “Warning, road ends 1 mile.” You continue to accelerate the car. Shortly after you approach another sign that reads, “Road ends, ½ mile NO Outlet.” You continue to accelerate. Then you pass a sign that says, “Danger. Road ends 1300 feet, 5000 foot drop.” You think to yourself, “cool, I’ve never been over a 5000 foot cliff before in a car” and you continue to accelerate.

Both you and I know that no one in his right mind would go down this road the way I’ve just described. However, there are two good reasons why someone who was actually sane would do this: #1 THEY DIDN’T SEE THE SIGNS! #2 THEY SAW THE SIGNS AND CHOSE TO IGNORE THEM.



What's this example have to do with you and wrestling well at crunch time? PLENTY! There are numerous personal "signs" as you approach a match/tournament/important showcase which let you know that you're going down the wrong road. If you miss them or chose to ignore them, then you will consistently end up performing poorly. What are these signs? They represent the typical, unhelpful things that you tend to say to yourself or think before and during your match or tournament. The more you engage and entertain these thoughts, the further down that road you'll get and the more difficult it will be for you to turn yourself around and go down the right road.

For example, let's say the very first sign that I'm heading down the wrong road is the night before a big tournament when I start thinking about what happened to me last year at this same event: "I've never done well here before. What if I have another bad showing." This thought may then be followed by, "What if I lose again to "Sam?" I should've beaten him last year and I totally choked!" If I let this go uninterrupted, my next thought might be: "I haven't felt that good in practice this week and I'm not sure I'm ready yet!" The next morning on the way to the tournament the signs may continue: "I feel really tight and slow. I've gotta have a good first match! What if I don't?!!!" After I find out who I have to face in this match, my next sign may be: "God, This guy is really strong and fast and I know he manhandled my teammate last month!" As I let each of these thoughts lead, uninterrupted into the next one, my confidence continues to drop and my level of nervousness rises. Or let's say that during my match, I can't get myself to attack and feel sluggish and tentative. My very first response to that, my first sign might be, "You are totally sucking! You're going to get your butt pinned if you don't start doing something FAST!" If I let that go uninterrupted, it may be followed by: "You're doing it again! You're choking! Why do you always seem to choke under pressure. You're such a head case!" The further I let myself get "down the road" into these thoughts, the more trouble I'm going to get into performance-wise. I will become more and more tight and completely distracted from the action of the match. As an athlete, you must train yourself to recognize the very first sign that you're heading down the wrong road so that you can quickly "turn the car around" and head down the right road. Spend some time with the following exercise:

### **Exercise:**

#### ***Reading your “signs” to ‘crash & burn’***

Chose two or more past match situations where you got too nervous either before or during the competition to perform to your potential. Think back to the very first sign (self-talk) that let you know you were heading down the wrong road. You may have been at home, the night before the match, in the car driving to the competition or warming up. Now think back to the very next negative thought (second sign) that followed. Where did this thought lead? (third sign). Write down in sequence each of these thoughts leading right up to the match’s start and including your thoughts during the contest. Remember, if you can easily recognize the typical signs that indicate you’re going down the wrong road, then you are in a position to be able to turn things around. If you can’t recognize your habitually negative before and during match self-talk, then you will be doomed to “go over the cliff” and perform badly, even before the match actually starts.

*The wise wrestler sayeth:*

**“The problem is NOT the problem. The real problem is how you REACT to the problem.”**

It is critically important for you to keep an understanding of this little saying in the back of your mind. Far too many wrestlers get knocked off track by things that happen either before or in the match: someone says something distracting or upsetting to you before the tournament starts, you might not feel “at your best” at match time, you see someone watching who makes you nervous, you make a stupid mistake which your opponent capitalizes on to score against you, the referee makes what you consider to be an unfair call, you lose your match or get pinned, etc. Save your energy and keep your head on straight! In so many things in wrestling as well as in life, the problem that has just happened and seems to be causing you so much heartache and aggravation is NOT the real problem. The REAL problem is always how YOU DECIDE TO REACT to this problem. It’s always your reaction that gets you into hot water far more than the event itself that occurred.

## STEP #5

### *Developing Awareness Of Your Focus Of Concentration*

Concentration is the most central and important mental skill in mental toughness. If you always seem to get too nervous before your matches/tournaments or consistently perform so much better in practice matches than you do in important matches when it counts, if you have a terrible time letting go of mistakes and losses, if you get easily intimidated or psyched out by certain opponents, then chances are quite good that your pre- and during match concentration is way off. By learning to control your focus of concentration, you will better handle competitive pressure, avoid psych-outs and intimidation, quickly rebound from mistakes and bad breaks, keep your self-confidence at a high level and more consistently perform your best when it counts the most. Understand that one of the main differences between your best and worst matches is where you put your focus of concentration.

### *Discovering The Concentration Differences Between Your Best & Worst Performances*

#### **Exercise:**

Recall in detail a great match. Where and when were you competing? What was the competitive arena like? Who was your opponent? How big was the crowd and who, if anyone, was in it watching you? What was at stake? Now try to remember your focus of concentration on the day of the match. Where was your focus during warm-up? Were you focusing on yourself and what you were doing or was your concentration locked on the upcoming match and how good your opponent was? What did you focus on during the coach's last minute comments? During the match? After making a mistake or getting scored on? After getting a good shot? If and when you got tired? Record your answers on Worksheet #3, Concentration & Good Performances. Now answer the very same questions for at least two more

great matches. After reviewing your concentration for three or more of your better performances you will begin to get a good idea of where YOU need to focus in order for you to do your best.

Next, pick a particularly bad performance from your past, a time when you felt that you really stunk the place out. In as much detail as possible, recall what you were focusing on the day of that match/tournament. Where was your focus during warm up? What did you concentrate on in the first period? If you got taken down, where did your concentration go? Where was your focus in between periods? If you made a mistake or failed to capitalize on an opening, where did your focus go? What did you focus on when things got tense in the match? Use Worksheet #4 Concentration & Bad Performances to record your answers. Take two or three more disappointing performances and answer the very same questions for each one. After reviewing your concentration for each of these bad matches you should begin to develop a pretty good idea of what you shouldn't be focusing on both before and during your matches.

### ***Do You Consistently Wrestle Better In Practice Than You Do In Competition?***

If you are like a lot of wrestlers I've worked with over the years, then you'd answer with a resounding and frustrating YES to this question! "I wrestle great in practice. I'm loose, relaxed and aggressive. I don't worry about what my opponent's strengths are and let those worries dictate how I perform. Instead I stick to my game plan and use the skills that I have!," you complain..."so how come my skills do a disappearing act in matches, how come I'm a completely different, more tentative wrestler when it counts!?" You can easily come up with the solutions to these puzzling questions by doing a similar concentration exercise.

#### **Exercise:**

Take a moment to examine your concentration in practice as compared to more pressured, match situations using Worksheet #5 Concentration in Practice vs. Matches. What do you concentrate on in practice? When you're facing off against a practice partner, where do you put your focus of concentration? When you make

a mistake in practice, what happens to your focus? How is that concentration different from your match focus when you make mistakes error? There is no mystery why a talented athlete will wrestle far better in practice than he will under big-match pressure. It is directly related to having a different focus of concentration in both of those situations. The first step in developing the concentration of a winner is to become aware of these differences. Examine your worksheets to see if you can begin to discover the concentration differences between practice and important performance.

## *What Is Concentration?*

### **THE ABILITY TO FOCUS ON WHAT'S IMPORTANT & LET GO OF EVERYTHING ELSE**

Remember that when you wrestle poorly, it's never a question of you not concentrating! You are ALWAYS concentrating both before and during your matches. The more important question is, "WHAT ARE YOU CONCENTRATING ON?" If you focus on the wrong things either before or during your matches, then you will always perform tightly and tentatively, way below your capabilities. At match time, there are many, many things that can distract you from having a proper focus: Your opponent and his size, strength and reputation; How you feel that day; The size of the crowd and who's in it; What's going on in school and your personal life; The match conditions; The refereeing; Your teammates and how they might be doing; Your coach and his comments; How big this match is; What may have happened in a previous match or the last time you had to face this particular opponent, and the list goes on and on! It is your job to KNOW exactly what is important for you to focus on and what you should be letting go of. Here's an exercise to really help you develop a working understanding of this all important principle: FOCUS ON WHAT'S IMPORTANT AND LET GO OF EVERYTHING ELSE.

### *Catching Markers*

#### **Exercise:**

Take 10 different colored magic markers and try the following "concentration test." Your task is to throw all 10 markers up at the same time, relatively high above

your head and to then try to catch as many as possible. It's important to use only your hands when you catch them and not to trap them against your body. Scoring of your "concentration ability" is as follows: If you catch 10 out of 10, that's 100% and you have done an awesome job of focusing and we'll call you MR CONCENTRATION. If you catch 5 out of 10, that's 50%, which is a BIG "F" in any school. If you catch less than 5, that means that you're challenged concentration-wise. Now, throw all 10 up at the same time. If you do this correctly without cheating, then like most people I do this with, you probably only caught 0, 1 or 2 markers. If this is the case, does it really mean that you can't concentrate? ABSOLUTELY NOT! This is an impossible task because there are too many things to focus on all at once. The fact of the matter is: ***you can only concentrate on one thing well at a time.***

While you can certainly focus on a ton of things at once, when it comes down to peak performance, you can only concentrate on one thing well at a time. If this is true, then you better make darn sure that the one thing you are concentrating really well on is WHAT'S IMPORTANT!

Now, pick one special marker in your group of 10 to focus on. For example, let's say the red one. Take that marker, stick it in the middle of the other 9 and throw all 10 up once again at the same time. Remember, your job is to only catch that one red marker. What happens? If you have relatively decent hand-eye coordination, then you effortlessly catch the red one. The point? It's very easy to focus on what's important when you know exactly what that is ahead of time.

### ***What's Important For You To Focus On Before And During Your Matches? Using Focal Points***

As we've already discussed, where you put your concentration before and during your matches determines whether you'll gobble with the turkeys or soar with the eagles. In wrestling, the most important focal points for you to consider are pre-match and whenever there is any break in the action. Where you put your focus of concentration is called a FOCAL POINT. Focal points can be KINESTHETIC or something that you FEEL. They can be VISUAL or something that you LOOK at. They can be AUDITORY or something that you LISTEN to. Focal points help you CONTROL YOUR EYES AND EARS. That is, they provide you with a predetermined place for you to put your concentration that will help distract you from anything

negative or distracting. Controlling your eyes means that you only focus on those things, before and during the match that keep you calm, confident and ready to perform your best.

In wrestling, your main focal point during the action is pretty obvious, it's your opponent's body and how he's moving! It's in between the action, prematch and in between periods, when you might have time to think, that you really want to work on controlling your eyes and ears by using focal points.

For example, if thinking about and/or focusing on the size, reputation and imagined prowess of your opponent during warm-up gets you too nervous, you'd control your eyes by keeping them away from him and on what YOU are doing in your warm-up. Let's say for example that you tend to stretch a certain way before the match starts, Then what you'd do as you're stretching is make sure that your eyes are on what you are doing and the rest of your focus is on the feel of the muscles you are stretching, while you are stretching them. (visual and kinesthetic focal points). Controlling your ears similarly means that before and during the match, you only want to listen to those things that keep you calm, confident and loose. For example, if someone is trying to tell you how unbelievably great your opponent is and this is getting you too nervous, then you'd control your ears by either turning up the volume on your ipod or finding someone else to chat with about something that has absolutely nothing to do with the upcoming match and your opponent!

Examples of KINESTHETIC focal points are: The feeling of your stretch as you loosen up before the match; the feeling of your breath going in and out while you're stretching; The feeling of your body as you go through some of your moves during warm-ups, etc. Keep in mind that for wrestlers, your most important during game focal point is always visual, your opponent and exactly what he is doing with his body. Visual, KINESTHETIC and audio focal points are equally as useful in between matches.

### **Exercise:**

List 4 Kinesthetic (K) or feeling focal points that you can use pre-match

K – Focal points: Pre-match

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Examples of VISUAL (V) focal points pre-match are: Looking at a teammate or coach as you chat with them; looking down at your arm/legs/feet as you go through your pre-match stretching; looking at a neutral spot in the gym on one of the walls; Defocusing your eyes and “spacing out” as you look out over the arena before your match starts;etc.

### **Exercise:**

List 4 Visual focal points that you can concentrate on before or in between your matches.

V – Focal Points: Pre-match

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Examples of AUDITORY (A) focal points are: Listening to music; Getting involved in a conversation with your coach or teammates; Listening to the sound of your breathing; repeating a positive word or phrase to yourself over and over again; Listening to the sound of the crowd; Singing to yourself.



### **Exercise:**

List 4 Auditory focal points that you can use pre-match.

A – Focal Points: Pre-match

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

IMPORTANT NOTE: It is NOT necessary for you to have more than one or two focal points before your matches. It is also NOT necessary for you to have all three kinds of focal points. What is important here is that you develop familiar concentration targets where you can consistently put your focus before your matches and whenever there is a break in the action.

### ***Pre-Match Focusing – Using Rituals***

As we're discussing, it is critical that you maintain control of your eyes and ears throughout the course of your match. When you allow your concentration to drift to the wrong things, you risk losing your confidence and tightening up. As a wrestler, you are always more vulnerable to losing your focus during the time in between matches, right before the start of one or whenever there is any break in the action. It's relatively easy for most athletes to focus during the actual match because you know that your focus needs to stay on what's immediately in front of you, your opponent's body and what he's doing in the moment.

It's during the times when you have "free" time to think, that you really need to maintain control of your concentration. The main way that you can insure that your focus stays in the right place before your match is by developing set pre-performance rituals. A pre-performance ritual is comprised of the those little things that you may think about, look at and/or do right before each match.

Your pre-performance ritual is important for two reasons: First, it's FAMILIAR. It's something you always do. Therefore it's calming and comforting because no matter who you're facing on the mat, how many people are watching or what may

be at stake, the one thing that always stays the same is your pre-match ritual. In this way your ritual is like a SAFE PORT IN A STORM. You can be getting ready for the championship match in a tournament or a must-win situation for you and your team, but the one thing that you can rely on to calm you down in this situation is your familiar, pre-match ritual. When something is familiar in that way it “binds” your anxiety;

The second critical reason for using rituals is that THEY GIVE YOU SOMETHING SPECIFIC TO FOCUS ON THAT HELPS DISTRACT YOU FROM ALL OF THE DISTRACTIONS! Rituals provide you with a safe place to put your focus. Because you can't simply say to yourself, “Don't think about that!” or “Don't focus on that!,” (because when you do, you end up doing exactly what you don't want to!), your ritual gives you something else to think about/focus on which distracts you from those upsetting thoughts or visuals.

In every sport, you will always find the very best athletes using pre-performance rituals to center and calm themselves down before stepping on the mat, taking a crucial free throw, pitching a baseball, swinging a golf club, taking a PK in soccer, serving in tennis, and hitting a softball.

Your ritual doesn't have to be very complicated or long. It can begin the minutes, hours, night or even days before a tournament. It can last for a minute or less or far more. It can be very simple like a pre-match ritual where you eat the same kind of meal, warm up in a certain way, stretch in a set sequence, listen to the same kind of music, etc. While the ritual may border on the superstitious, it's important to note that getting every step in the ritual completed is far less important than the actual purpose of the ritual!

A pre-performance ritual helps you systematically narrow your focus so that by the time you step onto that mat to face your opponent, you have a relaxed, one-point focus. It is designed to distract yourself from the anxiety-provoking distractions. So be sure to take some time in practice to develop these little, familiar personal behaviors. They'll go a long way in helping you maintain your composure under big match pressure!

## *Developing Championship Concentration*

Do you know how to concentrate? This very simple skill is the heart of mental toughness and the secret to you consistently wrestling the way that you're physically capable of. Want to learn to quickly bounce back from mistakes, disappointments or tough losses? Want to be at your best when the heat of competition is turned way up high? Then you have to learn to concentrate like a champion. To effectively build your concentration muscles, you must begin to practice two mini-skills. First, you must recognize that your focus of concentration has veered away from WHAT IS IMPORTANT. Second, you must discipline yourself to quickly and gently bring your focus back to the proper target. Mastering this "recognize and return" skill will help turn you into a mentally tough competitor.

What is critical for you to understand as an athlete is that: BREAKS IN YOUR CONCENTRATION WILL NOT HURT YOU. Everyone loses their focus now and again. Sometimes, in fact, you may be having the kind of day where you lose your focus a ton! Even during those scattered times, when your concentration is all over the place, you can still perform like a champion. The key here is that you recognize that you've lost your focus and immediately bring it back. Remember, it's not the break in concentration that hurts you. It's the break in concentration that you don't catch, so you end up wrestling for a few moments or more without bringing your focus back to what's important. It's during those times when your focus is off and you haven't yet recognized it, that you are most vulnerable to getting pinned!

### *Numbers With Distractions*

Exercise: Sit quietly with your eyes closed, feet flat on the floor. Put your focus of concentration on your breathing. When you inhale, focus on the feeling in your lower belly of the air coming in. When you exhale and feel the air going out, focus on the number 1. You can "see" a number one in your mind's eye. You can repeat "one" in your head, or you can do a combination. Inhale, feel the breath. Exhale focus on the number. Since this is a boring exercise you'll find your mind beginning to wander. When you do drift: Quickly recognize that you've lost the proper focus. Return your concentration to your breathing and the feeling of the air coming in. As you exhale focus on the number 2. You can see the #2 in your mind's eye, repeat the sound "two" in your head, or do a combination. Inhale focus on the breath, exhale

focus on the number. Each time you lose your focus and drift, add a number. Do this exercise for 3 minutes without any distractions and then turn a radio or CD player on and try the same exercise for an additional minute or two.

### *Developing A Concentration Cue*

Exercise: Take any object or a medal or trophy won competing and sit 3-4 feet away from it. Pick a specific spot on the object to gently rest your eyes. Your eyes will stay on this spot the entire exercise. Shift your focus to your breathing and when you inhale, feel your lower belly rise. As you exhale and feel your diaphragm deflate, repeat a word to yourself. The word will become your “concentration cue” or concentration signal/reminder. You can use words like “focus,” “power,” “strong,” “now,” “smile,” etc. Whenever your focus drifts from your visual target, breathing or word, quickly and gently return your focus. Do this exercise for 3 minutes without any distractions. Then take the trophy or medal and put it on top of a TV set. Sit far enough back so that in order for you to still see your spot, you must also see the entire screen. Turn the TV on but on very low volume at first. Try to stay focused on your spot for the next minute and a half without getting distracted by the images on the TV screen. When you do get distracted, no problem! Just quickly return your focus back to your spot and internal concentration cue.

Note: Sufficient practice of this exercise will develop and fine-tune your concentration abilities. Soon you will be able to quickly refocus yourself during your matches almost automatically. Understand that this very simple exercise is absolutely critical in helping you strengthen your concentration muscles. If you’re the kind of athlete who tends to hang onto mistakes and bad matches, who easily gets psyched out or intimidated or who has trouble staying calm under pressure, then I strongly recommend that you work with this exercise regularly.

## STEP #6

### *Wrestle Your Own Match / Focus On You For Championship Wrestling*

One of the more common concentration mistakes made by wrestlers at every level is to get too caught up with the opponent. When you focus too much on your opponent before or during your matches, you undermine your confidence, make yourself nervous and stop focusing on the things that help you perform your best when it counts the most. As a result, you'll always find your reaction time and foot speed slower, your aggressiveness gone and your performance tentative. For example, thinking about how big, strong or fast the opponent is or going online to check out his match statistics and who he's beaten this year may be one of the best way that I know of to **TOTALLY FREAK YOURSELF OUT!!!** In fact, allowing your focus of concentration to drift too much to your opponent (that is, thoughts and worries about him) before your match is the best strategy there is to intimidate or psych yourself out. Instead, you have to train yourself to **STAY INSIDE YOURSELF AND WRESTLE YOUR OWN GAME PLAN!**

What does this actually mean?

It means simply to focus on **YOU**, to not get caught up in comparing yourself with the competition, to not get distracted by even comparing yourself with your teammates. It also means that you **DON'T** want to spend time, pre-match going on-line and "studying" the stats and wins/losses of your opponents. Athletes who spend the days leading up to a big tournament/match doing this are unknowingly inflating the skill and prowess of their opponents while simultaneously undermining their own confidence.

There's a cardinal rule in wrestling as in most other sports. **YOU WANT TO "PLAY" YOUR OWN GAME** or **STAY INSIDE YOURSELF!** If the strength in your style is to be patient, stay relaxed and wait for the right opportunity to shoot, then this is exactly what you want to do. You don't want to suddenly go into the match

and impatiently and over-aggressively try to do too much. This is a great way to “step outside of yourself” and end up muscling your technique, When you do this, when you try too hard, your moves will be poorly timed and badly coordinated! This is one of the problems with over-focusing on the reputation and strength of your opponents. It will trick you into believing that you have to do something extraordinary to stay on the same mat as him. This will get you either muscling your technique or so worried about your opponent’s counters to tie yourself up in knots! Obviously, when either of these options happens, you’re toast!!! This is another reason why you want to avoid comparing yourself!

COMPARISON is a dirty word in sports. When you get caught up in comparing yourself you will almost always come out on the short end of the stick. Why? Because comparison is something that we do in our head, using our imagination. Most of the time your imagination will give you a negatively distorted picture of your skills and ability in relation to others. If you really want to out-wrestle a particular opponent, then you have to focus even more on yourself and your game plan, and NOT on them! This is an important contradiction that most wrestlers and coaches don’t fully understand. To beat the competition, you must focus more on YOU, and much less on THEM! If you get too caught up with how good you think that they are or what you think they can do, then you’ll tend to get yourself too uptight to wrestle to your capabilities. As a result you’ll go out there and either try too hard, pressing too much, or you’ll be so intimidated by your opponent that you’ll perform frightened and tentatively.

*The wise CHAMPION sayeth:*

**REMEMBER, THE MORE YOU CONCENTRATE ON BEATING AN OPPONENT, THE LESS CHANCE THAT YOU WILL! THE LESS YOU FOCUS ON BEATING AN OPPONENT AND THE MORE YOU FOCUS ON YOU AND EXECUTING YOUR GAME PLAN, THE MORE CHANCE THERE IS THAT YOU WILL EVENTUALLY EMERGE VICTORIOUS!**

*Understand this:*

**EVERY MOMENT DURING A MATCH WHERE YOU ARE FOCUSING ON THE OPPONENT AND HOW GOOD YOU THINK HE IS, IS A MOMENT WHERE YOU’RE HANDICAPPING YOURSELF, A**

## **MOMENT WHERE YOU BE VULNERABLE!**

If you spend time worrying about an opponent, then you are robbing yourself of your speed, confidence, strengths and skills! How good your opponent is on paper, his reputation, the kind of buildup your coach or the media may have given him are all totally irrelevant to whether you'll wrestle the way that you're capable of. You want your energy and focus on YOU, on your match strategy, on your skills and not on THEM! Yes, it's occasionally useful to have some scouting info on an opponent and his strengths and weaknesses. However, getting too caught up in that information will most often psych you out. Stay inside yourself. Focus on YOU! WRESTLE YOUR OWN GAME PLAN!!!

### **Exercise:**

Practice focusing on YOU in practice. During drills and practices be alert to whenever your focus of concentration drifts to a teammate, the coach or someone watching. Immediately catch yourself and return your focus to what YOU are doing at the moment. If you find that you are focusing on another athlete and comparing yourself, quickly interrupt this focus and bring yourself back to YOU. Try to get in the habit of immediately catching yourself the instant you drift away from YOU and then quickly coming back. The more that you work on this in practice, the easier it will be for you to stay inside yourself in pressured match/tournament situations.

### ***Step#7: Stay In The “Now” For Peak Performance***

Another common and costly concentration mistake made by many athletes at the big match/tournament or during a crucial point in the match is what I call “MENTAL TIME TRAVELING.” What “time traveling” involves is mentally leaving the present, or the NOW and either going back into the PAST or jumping ahead into the FUTURE. For example, if you lost your first match in a tournament and you're still thinking about it as your next match begins, then you are mentally in the past. If you miss a “perfect” opportunity to shoot on your opponent and potentially pin him, and you can't seem to stop thinking about it as the match continues, then you are again in the past. Similarly, if you go into a match thinking about the last time that you and your team lost to these guys, then you're mentally in the past. As far as wrestlers go, hanging out in the PAST is a universal mental mistake and one that will distract you from the task at hand and kill your confidence. To perform

your best you have to learn to immediately let your mistakes and bad matches go. Carrying your screw-ups around with you during a match or tournament will NOT help you correct them. On the contrary! Hanging onto them while you're wrestling will simply generate a ton more! Keep in mind that the time for you to work on your mistakes is IN PRACTICE after the competition and NEVER during your performance!

What can you do to quickly let your mistakes and bad matches go?

First of all, you have to get really good at recognizing that your focus of concentration has gotten stuck in the PAST. One way to do this is to know what the "language" is of the past. There are certain words and phrases that your "inner coach" uses that are clues to your being in the past. For example, wrestlers who tend to mentally hang out in the past, use language like: "Here we go again;" "I knew this was going to happen;" "I always choke under pressure;" or "Whenever I have a bad first match, the rest of my tournament sucks!;" "I can't ever seem to beat him!"; "How could I have lost to that guy?;" or "I should've done this!" or "I shouldn't have done that!" All of these phrases let you know that your focus is in the past.

Understand that having a past focus isn't always bad. There are times that you can temporarily go back into the past and it can be both positive and constructive. For example, let's say that you're down in a match with time running out on you. You can think of other matches in the past where you were similarly down and were able to stage a come from behind and win. This kind of time traveling isn't destructive as long as after you have this positive past flash-back, you immediately return your focus to the NOW of the match.

### ***Letting go of mistakes:***

Mistake wastebaskets: A quick technique that you can use to help you let go of your mistakes or past bad matches is to pick one or more "mistake wastebaskets" somewhere around the arena. What's a "mistake wastebasket"? Interesting enough, it's where you can put all your mistakes during the match so that they don't distract you and negatively affect your performance in this and future matches. What you do is pick a spot or one or more objects around the gym/arena before the match starts that will serve as your wastebaskets. They should be something that is relatively



easy to see. You can choose something on a wall, an actual trash can at one side of the arena, a part of the floor, etc. Once you've got your spot picked out, you want to make a "deal" with yourself. The deal is that every time that you mess up, you will "deposit" that mistake in the "wastebasket" until after the match/tournament. How do you "deposit" the mistake during the match? You can simply take a quick look at the spot and, in that look, you are symbolically leaving your mistake there. Or, quickly think, "throw away," and "leave" your mistake/bad performance there.

Mistake folders: A variation of this technique and one used to help emphasize that point that mistakes are to be thought about and worked on after the match in practice and not during it is to imagine that on the side of the mat, where your teammates or coaches are standing you have your very own "mistake folder." Every time that you mess up (AND YOU ARE NOT IMMEDIATELY IN THE ACTION OF THE MATCH), you can quickly glance over at your "folder" and that glancing will symbolically deposit your mistake in the folder to be worked on after the match/tournament in the next practice.

The fist squeeze technique: As we've been discussing, your primary mental task after you make a mistake or experience something upsetting is to immediately let these things go. Letting go actually has a physical feeling. Let me demonstrate it to you. Close your eyes right now and gradually tighten your right fist and arm from your fingers all the way to your shoulder. As you gradually tighten your hand and arm from 25% of your strength all the way up to 90% of your strength study the feelings of tension up and down your arm. Hold the tension about 10 seconds and then say the words to yourself, "let go," and as you do, very slowly begin to let the tension drain out of your right fist and arm. Notice the difference in feeling up and down your arm as the tension slowly drains out. Now repeat this process a second time remembering to keep your eyes closed. Pay particularly close attention to the feelings of letting go as your arm relaxes. Repeat this exercise several times until you can memorize the physical feeling of "letting go." Practice this exercise a few minutes a day so that you can link the words, "let go" with the actual physical feeling of letting go. In pre-match or in between match situations, after making a mistake, you can imagine that you've just "put" that mistake in your hand, make a fist, hold it there and then, repeat those words to yourself, "let go."

You can use this same technique after a particularly bad practice, challenge match or tournament. Imagine that you can symbolically place that bad outing in your right fist. Tighten it to 90% of your tension, hold it for 10 seconds and then repeat, “let go” to yourself. As you do, and you begin to feel the feelings of letting go, imagine that you can also let go of that bad performance and all the feelings associated to it.

The breathing technique: Pre-match or in between matches, completely shift your focus of concentration out of your head and away from your thoughts to the feeling of your breathing. Just follow your breath in and then out. As you exhale, and let go of the breath, imagine that you can also begin to let go of, a little at a time, any disappointment, frustration or anger about what just happened, the last match, a takedown, a bad call from the ref or any upsetting mistake that you made. With each progressive exhalation imagine that you can get rid of the tension, self-doubts and negative feelings until they become completely replaced by composure, relaxation and confidence.

If wrestlers aren’t getting themselves trapped in the past, the other very common mental mistake they make is to “time travel” into the FUTURE. When you leave the NOW and go into the FUTURE, you make yourself extremely vulnerable to performance-disrupting nervousness and CHOKING! What does it mean to go into the future? You’re thinking about the match’s outcome as you’re warming up. You’re telling yourself that you should be able to beat this opponent. You worry about whether you’ll wrestle well enough to advance to the finals or win the whole tournament. You worry about your won-loss average and what today’s match can do for it. You think about what people might say if indeed you lose. You get into the “what-if’s?” “What if I choke?” “What if I get re-injured?” “What if I can’t beat him?” etc.

Now don’t get me wrong. There are times when it is perfectly fine to go into the future. When you do mental rehearsal and you “mentally practice” wrestling to your potential, being loose, relaxed and aggressive, offensively dominating your opponent and coming out on top, you are in the future. This will not get you into trouble as long as your mental sessions are far enough ahead of your tournaments/ matches so that they don’t get you too nervous. Thinking about your outcome

goals in practice, why you're working so hard and what you want to accomplish is going into the future. However, it's perfectly fine to spend some time in practice reminding yourself of why you're working hard. The key point here is that you DO NOT EVER want to take your goals with you when you walk onto that mat for a match, an important tryout or a critical tournament. Keep in mind that focusing in the future on your goals will motivate you in practice to work hard but having that same future focus going into a competition will only serve to get you too uptight to perform your best.

**REMEMBER: EVERY MOMENT THAT YOU SPEND PRE-MATCH OR DURING THE MATCH WHEN YOUR FOCUS IS IN THE FUTURE IS A MOMENT WHERE YOU ARE VULNERABLE AND SETTING YOURSELF UP TO GET TOO NERVOUS TO PERFORM TO YOUR POTENTIAL.**

The secret to you wrestling consistently with intensity and a high level of skill is very simple. You must mentally keep yourself in the NOW!

**THE MOST IMPORTANT MOVE IN ANY MATCH IS THE ONE THAT IS HAPPENING RIGHT NOW!!!**

It is critical that you learn to immediately recognize when you are mentally time traveling so that you can very quickly return your focus to the task at hand. If you quickly return your focus to the NOW every time that you drift, then the drifting will not hurt your confidence nor hinder your performance. What WILL sabotage your wrestling is when you drift to either the past or future and then you allow yourself to stay there for an extended amount of time.

### *Developing Awareness Of Your Mental Time Traveling*

#### *Exercise:*

Spend time in practice working on staying mentally in the NOW. Pick a five minute period every so often during practice where your goal is to mentally keep your focus on what you are doing in the NOW. Every time that you become aware that your focus has drifted backwards to the past and a mistake or forward to the future and what you might be doing later or the results you want, quickly return it to the now and what you are doing at that moment. This is an excellent way to build up this very important mental muscle that you need to wrestle like a champion.

## ***Leaving Your Bad Matches In The Past – Forgiveness***

Want to perform like a champion? Want to go as far as possible in this sport? If you do, then you have to learn to be kinder to yourself after you mess up. It's one thing to have high standards and expect yourself to perform to these. It's quite another to put yourself down and emotionally beat yourself up whenever you fail or fall short. It's fine to strive for perfection, but getting upset with yourself when you're not perfect is a recipe for personal and athletic disaster! Getting down on yourself will NEVER make you a better wrestler. NEVER! What it will do is further kill your confidence and tighten you up like a drum!

Instead you want to learn to forgive yourself for your failures, losses and mistakes. Use your setbacks and disappointments to figure out what you need to change. Use your failures as feedback to improve. However, do not waste your emotional energy using your failures and losses as evidence that you aren't good enough and as an emotional stick to beat yourself up with! This is a huge mistake that will never motivate you to greatness. Instead it will progressively knock you down and crush your spirit. Learn to be a good coach to yourself. Forgive yourself for your humanness. Forgive yourself for your mistakes. Learn what you need to change in order to correct them and then, FORGET THEM!!!

UNDERSTAND THIS: You don't go from beginner to pro in anything in sports or life without failing and messing up ENOUGH!!!!!!

### ***Are You Trying To Wrestle With Extra Weights On?***

One big mental mistake made by athletes at every level is to go into a match or tournament carrying expectations. As we've discussed, expectations are related to the match, tryout or tournament's outcome or your goals. If you want to win a particular match, final in a tournament, win States, impress the scouts so you can earn a college scholarship, etc., then whether you know it or not, thinking about these goals when you go into your performances will be like carrying "heavy" weights on your back. It's fine for you to have goals and expectations in practice. In fact, your expectations and goals can actually motivate you to work harder and longer in practice. However, a cardinal rule for CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING is....

***Never Take Your Goals With You Onto The Mat When It Counts.***

Bringing expectations onto the mat with you at crunch time will only weigh you down just as sure as if you were wearing 10'lb weights strapped to each ankle and 5'lb'ers strapped to both wrists. You will feel too burdened to perform to your potential. When you make a match, tryout or tournament too important, when you pressure yourself with "I have to," "I've got to," "I need to," or "What if I don't?," then the end result is that you'll wrestle tight and tentatively. Leave your goals and expectations at home where they belong. Your goals and expectations should only be used as a motivational tool for practice, NEVER as a pressure-inducing threat when the outcome is important to you.

Technique: Write your goals down on a piece of paper the week or night before a big match/tournament and then put those goals in a drawer, out of sight. Do not look at your goals until after the performance is completely over. This is exactly what you need to do mentally. You need to keep your goals and expectations out of sight when it comes to your big, scary-important performances.



## STEP #8

### *Staying Cool & Calm In The Clutch*

(Learning how to handle the pressure of big matches)

#### *#1 Understanding The Causes Of Choking And Pre-Match Nervousness*

Here's the good news about those pre-match jitters: The importance of the match, tryout or tournament doesn't make you nervous. How talented or strong your current opponent or the field is doesn't make you nervous. How big the crowd is doesn't make you nervous. Who's in the crowd watching you doesn't make you nervous. Who you have to wrestle in the next round doesn't make you nervous. Your opponent's size, strength, quickness or reputation don't make you nervous.

#### YOU MAKE YOURSELF NERVOUS

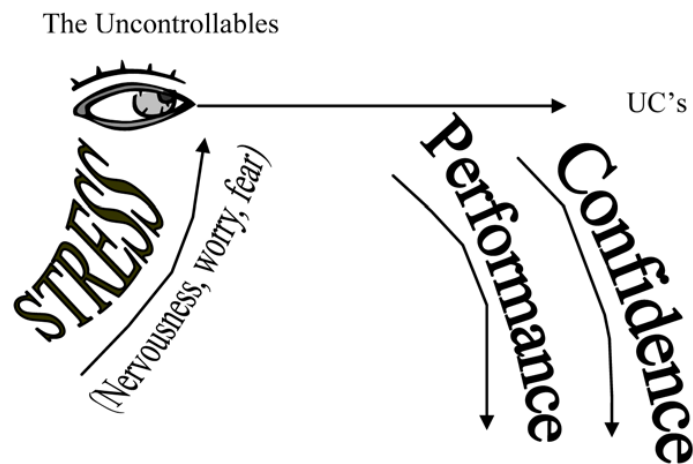
It is NOT outside events that cause you to get so nervous that you can't seem to breathe and feel like you're going to leave your lunch on the mat. Instead, it's what you say to yourself and focus on both before and during your matches that's the real culprit here. Nervousness comes from inside, not outside of us. This is the good news because you can learn to control what you think about and focus on before and during your matches. It's the good news because with a little bit of practice, you can learn how to calm yourself down under big match pressure.

## *The UC's As The Main Cause Of Runaway Nerves*

(FIGURE #6)

When you go into a tournament or match and either before or during these performances you are focusing on one or more UC's or "uncontrollables," then three things will always happen to you. First, you will begin to get nervous and physically tense. Second, you will lose your confidence. Third, and as a direct result of these first two, your wrestling will quickly "head south," down the proverbial tubes.

An uncontrollable is any factor before or during your match that is directly out of your control. Uncontrollables are mental traps. They are lying in wait for you and every other wrestler at that tournament. The bigger the competition, the more likelihood there'll be that you will fall into them. How do you avoid a trap? YOU HAVE TO SEE IT! YOU HAVE TO KNOW IT'S THERE! You have to know what the uncontrollables are and especially the ones that have gotten to you in the past.





## *Getting To Know Your “UC’s”*

### *Exercise:*

Below is a list of some typical uncontrollables. Go through the list and put an asterisk next to each UC that has gotten to you in previous pressured situations. When you’re finished, take a piece of paper and list all the uc’s that you starred. Next, take this list and post it in a highly visible place in your room. Why would you want to do that? Isn’t that sort of negative? If the uncontrollables are traps and the only way to avoid a trap is to be able to “see” it ahead of time, then having such a list will keep you exquisitely aware of what you should stay away from concentration-wise before and during your matches:

### *The UC’S*

- How big the match/tryout/tournament is
- How well your teammates’ may be wrestling
- Your opponent – His size, strength, speed or reputation
- Whether your opponent plays head games/talks trash
- The refereeing
- The arena and performance conditions (lighting, sound, temperature, etc.)
- Luck – either good or bad
- How long you have in between matches (at a tournament)
- How you feel that day (both physically and emotionally, i.e. sickness, fatigue, injury, etc.)
- The kind of warm-up you had
- Other people’s expectations of you (How they will think of or see you)
- What your parents will think or say about how you wrestle, I.e their reaction to the match’s outcome
- Who’s watching you in the stands, (scouts, friends, relatives etc.)

- Anything related to the FUTURE; (i.e. winning, losing, getting pinned, etc.)
- Anything in the PAST (mistakes, losses, what happened the last match, etc.)
- Injuries during the match
- The unexpected (“injury” timeout, etc.)
- Academic/personal stuff outside of wrestling, i.e. pressure for papers/tests
- The kind of draw you get
- Interpersonal dynamics on your team, (i.e. “drama”)
- Etc.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Keep in mind that focusing on an uncontrollable by itself won't get you into trouble. What WILL get you into performance hot water is focusing on an uncontrollable and NOT immediately returning your concentration to those things that you CAN control. It is perfectly natural to get periodically knocked off balance by the uc's. When this does happen, be sure that you:

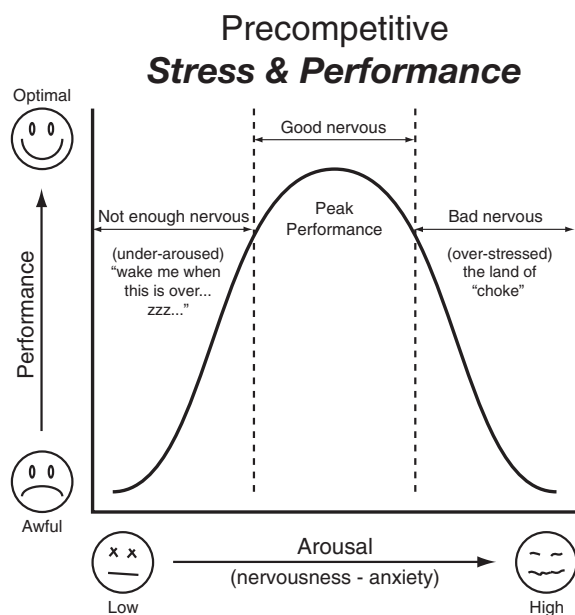
#1 RECOGNIZE THAT WHAT YOU ARE NOW FOCUSING ON IS AN UNCONTROLLABLE; #2 QUICKLY AND GENTLY RETURN YOUR FOCUS BACK TO WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL AND WHAT'S IMPORTANT AT THAT MOMENT. Remember, the one thing that you can ALWAYS learn to control is how YOU CHOOSE to react to the uncontrollables.

TO STAY CALM UNDER PRESSURE, BE SURE THAT YOU SHIFT YOUR FOCUS AWAY FROM THE “UNCONTROLLABLES.”

## ***#2 Reading Your Level Of Pre-Match Nervousness/Excitement***

How excited or nervous you are before your matches/tournaments will make or break how well you perform. Since the secret to consistently wrestling well under pressure is to stay loose and relaxed, your ability to do this is absolutely critical to making your athletic dreams come true. “Reading” your level of pre-performance excitement/nervousness is an important first step in getting yourself back in control.

In figure #7 you can see that as you move from left to right on the horizontal nervousness/excitement scale your level of pre-performance physiological arousal (nervousness) increases from being completely relaxed or under-aroused on the far left to being completely freaked out or over-aroused on the far right. The vertical axis measures how well you're performing. When you're low on the graph, you're wrestling like a chump and when you're higher on the graph, you're wrestling like a champ! As the diagram illustrates, there are three basic levels of pre-match nervousness/excitement: "not enough nervous"; "good nervous"; or "bad nervous." Understand that it is IMPOSSIBLE to wrestle to your potential when you are in "not



enough" or "bad nervous." If you go into a match or tournament overconfident or too cocky, the resultant "not enough nervous" will insure that you perform flatly. If, on the other hand you go into the match dreading it, worried about losing, feeling too much pressure or in other ways over-aroused, the resultant tight muscles will insure that you choke badly.

Wrestling your best when it counts the most demands that you be in "good nervous" right before the start. "Good nervous" is actually not nervousness at all but a feeling of being excited, anticipating the match and feeling a sense of confidence that you're up to the challenge while at the same time, still maintaining a relaxed looseness.

***There are 3 primary ways that you “read” your level of pre-performance nervousness:***

#1 PHYSICALLY in how you FEEL in your BODY

#2 MENTALLY in how you THINK and what you FOCUS on

#3 BEHAVIORALLY in how you ACT pre- match

“Good,” “bad” and “not enough nervous” look and feel different from each other. If you can learn to recognize these differences and your particular signs of “good”, “bad” and, when appropriate “not enough” nervous, then you are one step closer to learning to consistently stay cool and calm in the clutch. The following is a list of some of the general signs of increased nervousness (either “good” or “bad nervous”) in our three main categories:

| <b>PHYSICALLY</b>        | <b>MENTALLY</b>            | <b>BEHAVIORALLY</b> |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Increased heart & pulse  | Thinking speeds up         | Rituals             |
| Faster/shallow breathing | Negative thinking          | Mood swings         |
| Tighter muscles          | Focus narrows              | Getting “hyper”     |
| Cold hands/feet          | Increased self-doubts      | “motor mouth”       |
| Dry mouth                | Critical of self/others    | quiet               |
| Frequent yawning         | Forgetting                 | no movement         |
| Heaviness in limbs       | Negative images            | nervous habits      |
| Energy/lightness         | The “what if’s”            | superstitions       |
| Fatigue                  | Getting “spacey”           | “the giggles”       |
| Nausea                   | Positive/negative attitude | hostility           |
| Vomiting                 | mental rehearsal           | withdrawal          |
| Frequent urinating       | increased confidence       |                     |
| “The runs”               | hang onto mistakes         |                     |
| increased sweating       | let mistakes go            |                     |

## *Learning To “Read”Your Own Personal Signs*

### *Exercise:*

Think back to several really great past performances. These reflect a state of “good nervous.” Using Worksheet #6 and the above three columns as a guide, try to recall in as much detail as possible exactly how you felt physically, what you thought about/focused on, and how you acted BEFORE each of these top performances, (i.e. pre-match; before making a great shot; getting a clutch take-down, etc.). Next compare all your responses and you should discover your typical signs of “good nervous.” Now do the same for several sub-par performances using Worksheet #7. (most bad performances are a direct result of too much excitement or “bad nervous” rather than a state of “not enough nervous.”) Again, use the three categories to help you get specific about what your “bad” or “not enough nervous” looked like. Once you’ve reviewed several bad performances in this way, see if you can discover any patterns in how you experienced “bad” or, when applicable, “not enough nervous.” These patterns will reflect your typical signs of “bad (or not enough) nervous.”

### *#3 Acting As If*

The “ACT AS IF” strategy is one of the more important mental toughness techniques to help you get yourself back in control when the pressure is turned way up high and the garbage is hitting the fan. ACT AS IF is based on the principle:

IF YOU ACT THE WAY THAT YOU WANT TO FEEL, SOON YOU WILL BEGIN TO FEEL THE WAY THAT YOU ACT.

The way that you feel on the inside, your EMOTIONS, are always determined by how you act on the outside, your MOTIONS. In other words the way that you physically carry yourself, your posture, facial expression, physical gestures, walk, head and shoulders will ultimately affect and determine how you end up feeling emotionally. After a mistake or getting scored on, many wrestlers will hang their head, drop their shoulders, put a disgusted or down look upon their face and stop moving, dragging their feet around. However, when you ACT discouraged and down, when you act like a loser, you will begin to FEEL even more bummed out. Instead you want to ACT AS IF. You want to keep your feelings/emotions INSIDE and on the OUTSIDE you want to act like everything is fine.

Keep in mind that ACTING AS IF has absolutely nothing to do with moving your lips or trying to trick or convince yourself that everything is fine. Everything isn't fine and it's OK to acknowledge that fact on the INSIDE. However, on the OUTSIDE you want to act like you're in control by keeping your head and shoulders up, a smile or neutral expression on your face and maintaining a spring in your step and energy in your behaviors.

ACTING AS IF is what I call a WINNER'S FALL BACK POSITION. When a winner is exhausted, he will physically act like he has a ton of energy. When a winner is nervous, he'll physically act calm. When a winner is discouraged or down he will act as if he's up. Acting as if is the FAKE IT 'TIL YOU MAKE IT STRATEGY where you are deliberately TELLING A LIE with your body! So pre-match, when you can feel your lunch coming up and you can't seem to stop your knees from knocking together, ACT AS IF you are calm and in control. Deliberately act exactly the way that you would as if you were in "good nervous." If before all of your great performances you were jumping around, laughing and joking with your friends, then get off your butt and start doing just that!

One of the main reasons that ACTING AS IF is such an important strategy is because wrestling, like many sports, is a game of momentum shifts. You can be up one minute and down the next depending upon how the match plays out. Whether these momentum shifts overwhelm you and your teammates or not, whether they give your opponent the added edge to pull off the win, DEPENDS ENTIRELY UPON HOW YOU RESPOND WHEN THINGS ARE GOING BADLY. If you hang your head after a making a mistake and getting scored on, if you show your upset and disgust when you start losing, If you angrily slam your head-gear into the ground after losing, then you are inadvertently giving your current, not to mention all future opponents watching a psychological and emotional boost by acting like a loser.

Anytime you show your negative emotions at a tournament by dropping your shoulders, acting angrily, yelling out in disgust, or snapping at a teammate, coach or the ref, etc., you are letting your opponent know that you are upset and therefore vulnerable. You are telling him, "I am in trouble and if you apply pressure on me right now, I'll completely crack!" It's like being in a high stakes poker game but continually showing your cards to your opponent and then trying to bluff him! When

you do that, you'll lose your shirt! When your opponent has a big period and things are going against you, you want to show him and everyone watching absolutely nothing. You want to keep a neutral or intense expression on your face and ACT AS IF nothing has happened. When your opponent sees that time after time, over the course of the match, that you have no negative reaction when things go against you, then it will ultimately have an intimidating effect on him.

So keep your cards to yourself when you perform. ACT LIKE A WINNER all the time on and off the mat. Keep your head up, your shoulders square and speed in your step whenever things go wrong. Do not let on that you may be feeling down or discouraged inside. On the outside always show your opponent the behavior of a champion.

## ***Staying Calm In The Clutch: Relaxation Techniques***

### ***Slow And Deepen Your Breathing***

When you're nervous, your breathing speeds up and gets faster. This kind of shallow, rapid breathing will tighten your muscles and tire you out prematurely, causing you to slow down on the mat and wrestle poorly. To help you quickly calm yourself down under pressure, you must learn to control the depth and rate of your breathing. Sit quietly in a room free from distractions and put your concentration on your diaphragm or lower belly. Inhale very, very slowly focusing on your lower belly filling up like a balloon. At the top of your breath, when you can't take in any more air, pause for a slow count of 3 or 4. Then exhale, much slower than normal and feel your lower belly deflate. Repeat this sequence and imagine that as you inhale, you are completely surrounded by a white cloud. The cloud is filled with fresh oxygen, energy, confidence, calmness, strength, quickness, endurance, etc. As you inhale very slowly and feel your diaphragm rise, watch that cloud go in through your nose. At the top of your breath when you can't take in any more, pause and as you count slowly to 3 or 4, imagine that you can experience all that good stuff that you inhaled moving throughout your body. As you exhale slowly and feel your belly fall, imagine that you can watch that cloud come out from the tip of your nose, as you get rid of any negative energy, fatigue, self-doubts, stress, tightness, etc. Notice that that as you exhale, the cloud now comes out a much darker color like

black or brown. Repeat 8 – 10 of these slow, diaphragmatic breaths being sure to concentrate on the feeling of the air coming in and going out and “watching” in your mind’s eye, the cloud coming in and going out.

NOTE: Like all the exercises and techniques in this workbook, consistent practice of this breathing technique will enable you to confidently rely on it in pressured situations. Two or more of these diaphragmatic breaths right before a crucial match or point in the contest will help you calm down and get yourself back into “good nervous.”

### ***#6 Stretch***

Stretching is an easy and effective way to quickly calm yourself down pre-match. When done the correct way, stretching will loosen your muscles and provide you with a calming focal point where you can rest your concentration. The key to correct pre-match stretching is very simple. Make sure that as you physically stretch, your focus of concentration is completely on what you are doing in that moment and on the feeling of the stretching. It does you absolutely no good to stretch pre-match if, while you stretch, you’re allowing your concentration to wander to your opponent, worries about the match’s outcome or anything else that would distract you and get you uptight. Focus on the stretch while you stretch. In other words, stay in the “here & now.”

### ***#7 Tighten & Release***

Another quick technique to help you physically loosen up right before that big match is an abbreviation of the progressive muscle relaxation exercise. It involves focusing on any part of you that feels tight at the moment and deliberately tightening it even more for a short amount of time before then releasing the tension. For example, let’s say that you have tension up and down your legs, deliberately tighten those already tense muscles even more. Hold the muscle tension for 10 seconds and as you do so, be sure that your concentration is on the feeling of the tension in your leg muscles. Then say to yourself, “let go,” and as you do, slowly release all the muscle tension in that area. Then, repeat the sequence



of deliberately tightening the muscles, holding the tension for 10 seconds and releasing. This is a very quick and effective way for you to loosen yourself up right before that big match and even in-between matches at a tournament.

### ***#8 Using Imagery For Relaxation***

You can also effectively calm yourself down by using your imagination to mentally take yourself to a calm, safe place. Sit quietly, close your eyes and imagine yourself going to a totally relaxing place like a favorite beach, mountainside, woods or vacation spot. Experience yourself comfortably enjoying this place in as much detail as possible, seeing, hearing and feeling everything that you would as if you were actually there. Allow yourself to stay in this calming place for 5 – 10 minutes at a time until you feel calm, relaxed and in control. Regular “visits” to this mental “relaxation room” will make it available to you under pressure, right before that big tournament or crucial, must-win match. However, if you never consistently practice this exercise at home when you’re completely relaxed, then you’ll find that it won’t be “open” and available for you when you need it the most under pressure.



## STEP #9

### *Preparing Yourself To Perform Like A Champion When It Counts The Most Using Mental Rehearsal*

Mental rehearsal is a very simple, yet powerful mental skill that you can regularly use to help you stay calm under competitive pressure, build confidence, quickly let go of mistakes and losses and more effectively wrestle to your potential. Mental rehearsal or visualization is nothing more than deliberate mental practice where you imagine, in vivid detail, (seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling), wrestling that ideal match including having a great warm-up, executing smartly, making good shots, effectively countering your opponent's attacks, etc. Your visualization can even include feelings of celebration and accomplishment after a great performance.

Mental rehearsal works because what you vividly imagine stimulates the nerve-muscle connections involved in the actual movements. Repetitive stimulation of these connections forms a pathway for your muscles to follow once the actual movements are undertaken. In this way, mental rehearsal, when it's properly done, leaves you with a confident feeling of preparedness, like you've already been there. With sufficient practice, you can fine-tune this mental skill to the point where you can consistently raise the level of your performance.

***Follow these simple guidelines to help you master the skill of mental rehearsal and better prepare you for those high pressured matches:***

1. Always start your imagery sessions with several minutes of relaxation. Your imagery will be far more effective when you're completely relaxed. (DO NOT do imagery when you're anxious)
2. Do NOT use mental rehearsal too close to the actual start of your match. If you do, you will make yourself too nervous to wrestle your best. Some athletes need to stop a day or two before the match/tournament. Others can use imagery right up until an hour or so before the actual start. Experiment

to discover which time frame works best for you.

3. Make your imagery as vivid and detailed as possible including pictures, sounds, muscle feelings and even smells.
4. Have a specific goal in mind for your mental rehearsal sessions. For example, if you regularly get upset and hang onto your mistakes, “practice” quickly letting these miscues go and following them up with a great move or take-down.
5. Try to feel what you’d be feeling as if you were actually on the mat, in the action. Your imagery will be much more effective if you can step into the physical feelings of the match and “practice” these.
6. Have a beginning, middle and end to each of your sessions. The beginning can involve traveling to the match/tournament, your warm-up, pre-match ritual and the start of the match including your first few shots. The middle could include scenes from the second period, again another good move or a great, defensive counter. The end could include the final period, coming from behind to outscore your opponent, getting a crucial take-down, or executing a match-saving escape. Be sure to include the post match celebration and feelings of excitement and accomplishment, etc.
7. Make your mental rehearsal sessions short. (10 minutes at the most including a 4-5 minute period of relaxation).
8. Always try to imagine what you want to have happen and how you want to feel, NOT what you’re afraid will happen or don’t want.
9. If your images turn negative at any point in your session, be patient and “rewind” them, replaying the scene again and again until they turn out the way that you want them to.

Keep in mind that mental rehearsal is a learned skill. In the beginning, you may close your eyes and see nothing but a blank slate. Be patient and keep practicing. Just because you can’t consciously see, feel or hear anything doesn’t mean that your imagery isn’t working. You are always making images unconsciously and these

images are just as powerful and effective as the ones that you are consciously aware of. When you go to do an imagery session and can't "see" or "feel" anything, just think your way through what you want to be going on in as much detail as possible.

### ***Using "Coping Imagery" To Effectively Handle Stressful Situations Before And During Your Matches***

Mental rehearsal is a wonderful tool to help you learn to stay calm under pressure and to build confidence in your ability to handle stressors that in the past might have gotten you too nervous to perform your best. Let's say, for example, that having to face a certain opponent would freak you out, physically tighten you up and undermine your confidence. Use your mental rehearsal session to vividly imagine yourself staying calm, cool and focused against this particular individual, maintaining your composure and wrestling according to your game plan. Similarly, if you tend to get too upset over bad calls from the ref, mentally practice refocusing yourself immediately after an obvious bad call and wrestling with renewed concentration and intensity. If your problem is one of being too nervous pre-match, then mentally practice staying relaxed and in control right before the start of the match and throughout.



## STEP#10

### *Utilizing A “Championship Match Plan” To Wrestle Like A Champion*

Perhaps one of the biggest mental mistakes that wrestlers make at their more pressured tryouts, matches or tournaments is to take the wrong goals with them into these performances. What are the wrong goals? Anything related to outcome like, WINNING, NEEDING TO BEAT A PARTICULAR OPPONENT, WANTING TO GO UNDEFEATED, WANTING TO PROVE TO THE COACH THAT YOU DESERVE HIS RESPECT, NOT WANTING TO DISAPPOINT MOM OR DAD, etc. Outcome goals tend to distract you from the task at hand and get you too nervous and tight to wrestle your best. Remember, your outcome goals are strictly a motivational tool for practice only! To perform your best when it counts the most you must learn to “carry” different goals onto the mat with you. These goals, when focused on and accomplished, will GUARANTEE that you’ll achieve your outcome goals. These goals make up what I call a CHAMPIONSHIP MATCH PLAN.

What is a Championship Match Plan? A Championship Match Plan is like a recipe for peak performance. Like any recipe, it has specific ingredients that must be utilized in order to achieve the desired outcome. Like any recipe, when some of these “ingredients” are omitted, what you end up with will leave you with a “nasty taste” in your mouth! Look over the following mini-goals of this basic CHAMPIONSHIP MATCH PLAN and see which ones will help you cook up one mean performance:

#### *The Championship Match Plan*

1. STAY LOOSE & RELAXED – The secret to wrestling your best when it counts the most lies in your ability to stay mentally and physically loose under pressure. Excessive pre-match nervousness is the number one cause of

choking and bad performance. Therefore it is absolutely critical that you have several relaxation tools in your mental toughness toolbox. Simply put, you need to know HOW to relax when the competitive pressure is turned up high. Things you can do pre-match to actually achieve this state of relaxation: Control your breathing; stretch; listen to music; distract yourself with light or funny conversation with teammates; Do NOT focus on the importance of the match; Use relaxation techniques. (See section, “Staying cool and calm in the clutch” for these).

2. HAVE FUN – One oftentimes overlooked, but critical ingredient in great performances is FUN! If you are having fun BEFORE and WHILE you perform, then chances are good that you will remain loose enough to wrestle your best. Too many athletes wait until after the match/tournament before deciding whether they had fun or not, i.e. “When I pin this guy, that’s fun,” or “Let me win this tournament and then I’ll have fun,” etc. If you have to wait until after the outcome of the match before you can decide whether you’ve had fun or not, then you’ve got it BACKWARDS! You can’t wrestle to your potential at ANY LEVEL unless you’re having fun FIRST! FUN IS AN ABSOLUTE MUST IN ORDER FOR YOU TO DO YOUR BEST. If you’re NOT having fun, then you won’t perform well. So before the match, let yourself get into the challenges facing you. Get into hanging with your teammates, laughing and joking. Whatever is fun for you at the tournament, then you want to make sure that you’re doing it and enjoying yourself.
3. STAY FOCUSED IN THE “NOW” – You perform your best when you can keep your concentration in the “now,” on the move that’s being thrown right now! If you are in the past or the future before or during a match, then you will always be a step or two behind. The only mental time zone where you have access to all your skills, quickness, great reflexes and strength is the NOW. Remember, THE MOST IMPORTANT MOMENT IN ANY MATCH IS THE ONE THAT YOU’RE INVOLVED IN RIGHT NOW!
4. WHEN YOU “TIME TRAVEL” (PAST OR FUTURE) RECOGNIZE THAT YOU’VE LEFT THE NOW AND QUICKLY AND GENTLY BRING YOUR FOCUS BACK TO THE NOW - Remember, drifting won’t hurt you as long as you stay on top of it. When your focus lags behind or jumps ahead, quickly return it to the now.



Each moment that you wrestle where your focus is in the past or the future is a moment where you're vulnerable, a moment when you're handicapping yourself because you're not paying attention to what is important right now!!

5. **WRESTLE YOUR OWN MATCH/FOCUS ON YOU** – Want to win your match, beat that annoying opponent and prove yourself to your coach and parents? Want to wrestle the way that you're fully capable of? If you do, then you'll stay focused on what YOU are doing and "WRESTLE YOUR OWN MATCH." Being overly concerned with your opponent's size, quickness, strength and moves will mentally take you out of your game plan and cause you to perform poorly. Focus on YOU! Stay inside yourself.
6. **WHEN YOUR FOCUS LEAVES YOU, RECOGNIZE YOU'RE DRIFTING AND QUICKLY AND GENTLY BRING YOUR FOCUS BACK TO YOU** – If you find yourself preoccupied with someone else before or during your match, your immediate job is to catch yourself and quickly return your focus back to you and what you're doing in the moment. You can't wrestle well if you're mentally distracted by those around you.
7. **KEEP TRACK OF THE "UC'S" (UNCONTROLLABLES)** – Focusing on any uncontrollable either before or during your match will get you uptight, undermine your self-confidence and ruin your performance. Your job going into those high pressured situations is to know what your "UC'S" are and to make sure that your focus stays away from them. If you should find yourself concentrating on an uncontrollable, quickly return your focus to what you are doing. Remember, you can always control how YOU CHOOSE to react to any uncontrollable.
8. **USE LAST MINUTE NEGATIVE THINKING AND SELF-DOUBTS AS A NEUTRAL SIGNAL TO RELAX AND REFOCUS** – Remember, last minute doubts and negativity are quite normal. When you hear their nasty little chatter in your ears right before you step onto the mat, RELAX! Do NOT engage the negativity. Instead, immediately refocus your concentration on the task at hand. Allowing yourself to "jump in" to the negative thoughts will tend to get you "emotionally hijacked." Negative thinking and doubts are nothing more than brain wave activity. They are NOT a prediction of what will

happen. Change the channel and refocus on the task at hand, this move and what your opponent is bringing to you.

9. **DON'T THINK, JUST WRESTLE** - Wrestling like a champion is all about feel, flow and reacting and NOT about thinking. Thinking is hazardous to your health as an athlete. You can't think your way through a good match. You have to get out of your own way and allow your muscle memory and instincts to take over. Before that big match/tournament, reassure yourself that you've paid your physical dues, that you've done everything that you can possibly do to prepare and then completely put your concentration on FEEL and REACT. Thinking always distracts you from the important task at hand and ties you in knots.
10. **TRUST AND LET IT HAPPEN** – If you have made an honest investment in your training, then that great match that you so desperately want is already inside of you as you read these words. How do you get that great performance to come out? You have to relax, trust your training, trust your coaching, trust your muscle memory and just let the match flow and come to you. You don't need to force it. Just let it flow. This is what great wrestling is all about. Your shots are quick and strong by not trying to make them quick and strong. Instead, you relax, see your opponent and what's in front of you and just react!
11. **USE FOCAL POINTS BEFORE YOUR MATCHES** – Since quickly catching your drifting focus and bringing it back is so important to mental toughness, it is absolutely critical that you have specific focal points and pre-performance rituals that you can return your concentration to. Know ahead of time what your pre-match rituals/focal points are. Have a specific pre-match ritual picked out ahead of time that you feel comfortable using. Your rituals help keep you confident and composed under pressure.
12. **FORGIVE YOURSELF FOR YOUR MISTAKES, BAD MATCHES AND LOSSES, LEARN FROM THEM AND THEN LEAVE THEM IN THE PAST** – Understand that your success as an athlete is based on your failures. You can NOT become a champion without failing ENOUGH!!! Therefore, how you

handle your failures, disappointments and losses is absolutely critical to how successful you'll ultimately become as a wrestler. When you have a bad match or disappointing tournament, look for what you did wrong. DON'T waste your time and energy beating yourself up! Getting down on yourself has no constructive value whatsoever. Instead, learn from your mistakes and losses, forgive yourself for being human and then leave these disappointments in the PAST where they belong!

### *Using The Championship Match Plan*

Choose all or any number of the above goals that fit for you. Write them down on a piece of paper. Make several copies. Put one up on your wall or mirror in your bedroom, put one inside your locker at school and keep one in your bag. Look at these goals before your matches. Remember their purpose. The match plan is designed to help you stay focused on what's important. After a match or tournament, take a few minutes to evaluate your performance in relation to this match plan. That is, ask yourself, "on a scale of 1 – 10, where 1 = not at all and 10 = a perfect job, how well did I accomplish each goal?" Answers of 7- 8 or less indicate the need for more improvement on that particular goal for your next match. Answers of 9 or 10 indicate that you executed that particular goal quite effectively. Remember, the way to get to that great performance is by following the goals of the CHAMPIONSHIP MATCH PLAN.



## STEP #11

### *Playing Your Role On The Team To The Very Best Of Your Ability*

As the sports psychologist for the University of Connecticut Huskies, I had an opportunity to work very closely with a number of the athletic teams for both the men and the women. UConn has especially made a name for itself as a national powerhouse in men's and women's basketball, men's and women's soccer, and their reputation as a strong football program is growing. I also worked very closely with their softball, baseball, track & field, tennis, lacrosse and field hockey programs the years that I was there.

In my work with this D-1 school, I witnessed a very interesting phenomenon. In many of their sports, UConn attracts some of the best high school athletes in the country. Many of these athletes were superstars back in their home towns, garnering media attention, attracting huge crowds to their games and helping their teams win Conference and State titles. They came to UConn with the hopes of making an immediate contribution to their new team and continuing their athletic dominance on a larger, national stage.

For a number of these athletes however, they were met with a massive "culture shock." They now found themselves on a team of superstars! No longer were they the obvious standout, with the team's offense and defense constructed around them. For the first time in their athletic career they now had to fight just to make the starting line-up. In fact, for quite a few of these athletes, they had to experience what it was like to sit on the bench, to be a role player for the very first time in their life!

Quite a few of the athletes who didn't make the starting line-up at UConn could have easily started at many other D-1 programs. However, because they chose to play at Connecticut, they now had to get used to sitting on the bench. No serious athlete wants to play this role on a team. You join a team to "play" and compete, not to sit!

However, for a team to be successful, every athlete has an important role to play on the team. Fair or unfair, good or bad, this role is assigned to them by the coach. If a player is unhappy about his role and he “shares” his unhappiness with all those around him, the whole team suffers. Why? Because you can’t create a championship team without each athlete on that squad accepting his role and then playing it to the very best of his ability.

What is the role of a support player? His job is to push the starters in practice and make them better while working on and improving his own skills. The role players keep the starters “honest.” Role players physically and emotionally challenge the starters on a daily basis. In my opinion, this is how one develops a National Championship team. I’ve watched this happen with both men’s and women’s basketball as well as with men’s and women’s soccer at UConn. For a team to be truly successful, everyone has to accept their role, respect everyone else’s role and then play their role to the fullest of their abilities!

But let’s be honest here. Being a role player is not much fun. In fact, it’s by far the most difficult position to play on any team. It is frustrating, oftentimes boring and frequently demoralizing. You have to work just as hard, if not harder than all the starters, but you get no glory for your efforts. It seems that you work in obscurity. No one ever sees much of you outside of practice. However, if you truly would like to be a winner, then part of your job is to not only accept the role that the coach assigns you, but to try to play that role to the very best of your ability. Don’t go kidding yourself into believing that just because you don’t get into a big game or play an obviously important part of a huge victory, that you’re not of value to your team. Your worth, in my opinion, is of equal value to the athletes who get all the limelight.

What you want to do as a role player is to act like the champion that you are, to act like you are a valuable and contributing member of the squad. If some of the starters treat you disrespectfully, then know in your heart that they are simply too selfish and stupid to understand what a championship team is all about. When you “sit the bench,” or compete in insignificant exhibition matches, keep your head and attitude up. Support your teammates. Stay positive! Stay focused on the action and especially on what is going on in your position. You never know when your chance will come and when it does, you want to be ready for it. If you are truly miserable

about your role on the team, then commit yourself to doing something about it both in practice and over the course of the off-season. Work harder. Strengthen your weaknesses. Get in better physical condition. Work on your technique and quickness. Do whatever it takes to get better.

However, do NOT sit on the sidelines and show your unhappiness. Do NOT sit by and criticize the coach in your head. Do not put a long face on and whine to your teammates about what a raw deal you're getting. This will only serve to make you unhappier and further distract you from the team's mission. Remember, your job is to be an athlete. Your job is not to criticize or evaluate the coaching decisions. Be a winner, NOT a whiner!!! Accept your role. Act like a champion and support the starters or better skilled athletes. Keep your head in the "game." Don't lose heart. Use your frustration and disappointment to motivate you into working harder. Your time will eventually come.

REMEMBER: Awareness is the key to change, the key to improvement. You have to know what you are doing wrong before you can correct it. Are you AWARE of your focus of concentration and self-talk when you sit on the sidelines? What's your attitude like? Are you in the match or in your head being ticked off at the coach? Are you supporting your team or thinking that the person competing in front of you is nowhere as good as you? Spend a few minutes right now to HONESTLY answer these questions and rate the kind of role player you are.

(Use true (T) or false (F) answers)

- \_\_\_ I spend a lot of time on the bench/sidelines during competitions being angry and upset
- \_\_\_ I think the coach is wrong in his assessment of me
- \_\_\_ During matches I question why certain athletes are competing and I'm not
- \_\_\_ I frequently lose track of the match and drift off when I don't get to compete
- \_\_\_ My feeling is that if I can't start, why should I be on this team
- \_\_\_ I typically resent the starters

\_\_\_ I'm willing to do anything for this team

\_\_\_ I believe if I work hard enough I'll eventually get my chance

\_\_\_ I actively support the starters during the match

\_\_\_ I see the point in working hard in practice even if I'm never going to compete

\_\_\_ I understand and accept that my playing time is completely the coach's decision

\_\_\_ I am willing to be a role player if this is will help our team win

SCORING/INTERPRETATION: Assign a "0" value for each "T" you answered for questions 1 – 6 and a "1" value for each "F" you answered. Assign a "1" value for each "T" you answered for questions 7 – 12 and a "0" value for each "F" you answered.

The higher your score, the better you are attitude-wise as a role player. If you scored between 10 and 12 you have accepted your role and you're helping the team with your presence. This kind of attitude will also help you continue to improve as an athlete. However, if your score was below 6, then you need some serious attitude readjustment work. Your attitude is hurting your squad and will eventually hold you back in your development as a good competitor. Remember, you don't have to like being a role player. You don't have to like sitting on the bench. That's not the issue. No one likes not playing. The issue is learning to play that role well for the team, if that's the one you've been assigned. That's what winners do.



# CONCLUSION

Once you get to that big match, important tournament or critical showcase, how well you wrestle depends almost entirely on how mentally tough you are. Remember what I said when we started this program: “In matches and when it really counts, wrestling is 95% mental and 5% physical.” Don’t leave this all-important mental side of your sport to chance. Your mind is far too powerful a force to leave untrained. Harness the awesome power of your mind today by beginning to systematically work on developing mental toughness. Use this workbook to strengthen your mental muscles, build your self-confidence and help you stay cool and calm in the clutch. Remember, you can’t play wrestle like a winner without using your head. So start today to systematically develop the mind of a champion.



6. ...when a teammate or coach yelled at you?
7. ...when a call went against you?
8. ...facing a particularly intimidating opponent?
9. ...if you missed a shot?
10. ...if you got pinned?



6. ...when a teammate or coach yelled at you?

7. ...when a call went against you?

8. ...facing a particularly intimidating opponent?

9. ...if you missed a shot?

10. ...if you got pinned?

*WORKSHEET #1*

*Self-Talk And Bad Performances*

*(Bad match #3)*

What was your self-talk/thoughts ...

1. ...the day of the match?

2. ...during your warm-up?

3. ...just before the match started?

4. ...during the first period?

5. ...after making an mistake or getting scored on?

6. ...when a teammate or coach yelled at you?

7. ...when a call went against you?

8. ...facing a particularly intimidating opponent?

9. ...if you missed a shot?

10. ...if you got pinned?





6. ...when a teammate or coach yelled at you?

7. ...when a call went against you?

8. ...facing a particularly intimidating opponent?

9. ...if you found yourself behind?



6. ...when a teammate or coach yelled at you?

7. ...when a call went against you?

8. ...facing a particularly intimidating opponent?

9. ...if you found yourself behind?



6. ...when a teammate or coach yelled at you?

7. ...when a call went against you?

8. ...facing a particularly intimidating opponent?

9. ...if you found yourself behind?



7. ...after your opponent scored a take-down?

8. ...in between periods?

9. ...just before you made a great shot?

10. ...during the last minute of the match?

11. ...facing a really tough opponent?

12. ...as time wound down and you were trying to hold on and win?

## *WORKSHEET #3*

### *Concentration And Good Performances*

*(Good match #2)*

Where was your focus of concentration ...

4. ...the day of the match?

5. ...during warm-up?

6. ...just before the start?

4. ...after you made a mistake or got scored on?

5. ...after you scored?

6. ...when the ref made a bad call?



7. ...after your opponent scored a take-down?

8. ...in between periods?

9. ...just before you made a great shot?

10. ...during the last minute of the match?

11. ...facing a really tough opponent?

12. ...as time wound down and you were trying to hold on and win?

*WORKSHEET #3*

*Concentration And Good Performances*

*(Good match #3)*

Where was your focus of concentration ...

7. ...the day of the match?

8. ...during warm-up?

9. ...just before the start?

4. ...after you made a mistake or got scored on?

5. ...after you scored?

6. ...when the ref made a bad call?

7. ...after your opponent scored a take-down?

8. ...in between periods?

9. ...just before you made a great shot?

10. ...during the last minute of the match?

11. ...facing a really tough opponent?

12. ...as time wound down and you were trying to hold on and win?

*WORKSHEET #4*

*Concentration And Bad Performances*

*(Bad match #1)*

Where was your focus of concentration ...

1. ...the day of the match?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. ...during warm-up?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. ...just before the match started?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. ...after you made an mistake?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. ...after you got scored on?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. ...when the ref made a bad call?

7. ...after getting taken down by your opponent?

8. ...in between periods?

9. ...just before you got pinned?

10. ...when the match was close?

11. ...having to face an intimidating opponent?

12. ...trying to score against/pin your opponent?

*WORKSHEET #4*

*Concentration And Bad Performances*

*(Bad match #2)*

Where was your focus of concentration ...

1. ...the day of the match?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. ...during warm-up?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. ...just before the match started?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. ...after you made an mistake?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. ...after you got scored on?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. ...when the ref made a bad call?

7. ...after getting taken down by your opponent?

8. ...in between periods?

9. ...just before you got pinned?

10. ...when the match was close?

11. ...having to face an intimidating opponent?

12. ...trying to score against/pin your opponent?

*WORKSHEET #4*

*Concentration And Bad Performances*

*(Bad match #3)*

Where was your focus of concentration ...

1. ...the day of the match?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. ...during warm-up?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. ...just before the match started?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. ...after you made an mistake?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. ...after you got scored on?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. ...when the ref made a bad call?



7. ...after getting taken down by your opponent?

8. ...in between periods?

9. ...just before you got pinned?

10. ...when the match was close?

11. ...having to face an intimidating opponent?

12. ...trying to score against/pin your opponent?

## WORKSHEET #5

### *Do You Wrestle Better In Practice Than You Do In Matches?*

*(Compare and contrast)*

#### **PRACTICE MATCHES**

What do you tend to focus on ...

1. ...before you get to the venue?
2. ...during warm-ups?
3. ...just before the start (of matches or practice)
4. ...when you begin to feel tired?
5. ...when you make a mistake or get scored on?
6. ...when you get beaten by teammates or opponents?

7. ...when the coach criticizes you?

8. ...when your shots are off?

9. How much do you concentrate on other wrestlers?

10. How much does your focus drift to the future & outcome?

11. How much do you compare yourself?

12. How much time do you spend focusing on what you think you are doing poorly?

13. How easily distracted are you?

*WORKSHEET #6*

*Signs Of Good Nervous*

**Great match #1**

Physical signs  
(in body)

Mental signs  
(thinking/focusing)

Behavioral signs  
(how I acted pre-match)

**Great match #2**

Physical signs

Mental signs

Behavioral signs

*WORKSHEET #7*

*Signs Of Bad (Or Not Enough) Nervous*

**Bad match #1**

Physical signs  
(in body)

Mental signs  
(thinking/focusing)

Behavioral signs  
(how I acted pre-match)

**Bad match #2**

Physical signs

Mental signs

Behavioral signs



## DR. G'S BIO

Dr. Alan Goldberg is an internationally recognized expert in the field of applied sports psychology. He holds a black belt in traditional Okinawan Karate, Shorin Ryu style. As a sports psychology consultant Dr. G works with wrestlers, boxers, martial artists and other athletes across all sports helping them develop mental toughness, better handle competitive pressure and perform to their potential. As a regular columnist for a number of national and international publications, Dr. G writes on the subjects of sports psychology training and mental toughness. He is the author of Sports Slump Busting, (Llumina press); This Is Your Brain On Sports, with Dr. David Grand (Dogear Press); and Playing Out Of Your Mind (Reedswain Press).