

Tips For Psyching Up

by John J. Bowman, Ph.D.
Sport Psychologist

*"For they had learned that true safety was to be found in long previous training and not in eloquent exhortations uttered when they were going into action."
Thucydides*

In preparing for training camp or for a championship at the end of the season it is necessary to adjust your mental state to that level at which you perform at your best. This is commonly referred to as Psyching-Up. Here are three tips (rules) for psyching-up that are sure to help you attain your best mental state for sport performance.

First, **SOMETIMES UP MEANS DOWN**. Second, **DON'T GO TO PRACTICE**, and third, **THERE IS NO FAILURE, ONLY FEEDBACK**. Now, you are probably sitting there shaking your head because these rules don't seem like they make sense when it comes to improving your performance. Therefore, I have termed these rules: The Three Crazy Rules for Psyching-Up.

Noted memory expert, Harry Laraine, believes that we can improve our memory for something by imagining it in some ridiculous way. I am hoping that these Three Crazy Rules will assist you in bringing to mind what you need to do to get psyched-up for training and competition.

Let's start with the first Crazy Rule: **SOMETIMES UP MEANS DOWN**. How many times have you heard your coach tell you "Get Pumped!" or "Get Psyched Up!" Have you ever wondered exactly what you were supposed to do at those times? Many coaches and athletes believe getting psyched-up means getting yourself emotionally and physically sky high. This idea may stem from the fact that the more emotionally and physically aroused we get, the more adrenaline is pumped into our system, and for a brief period we are able to exhibit high levels of energy, speed, and strength.

However, the problem with this idea is that when we get overly excited or physically aroused, we can experience a marked decline in our performance. This condition of being over aroused has sometimes been referred to as "choking" or a case of "stage fright" and is usually accompanied by excessive sweating, feelings of butterflies in the stomach, the urge to urinate, and often a tightness of the neck and chest muscles.

Psychologically, a person who is overly aroused usually experiences an accompanying sense of fear, such as a fear of making a foolish mistake, performing poorly, or letting his/her teammates down. It is easy to see then that getting yourself sky high is not necessarily the best formula for Psyching-Up.

Sports Psychologists have come to recognize that every athlete has his/her own ideal level of arousal for performance. This has been called the **IDEAL PERFORMANCE STATE**. Simply speaking, this means that each athlete must determine their own unique level of physical and emotional arousal at which they perform at their best. Sometimes athletes perform at their best when their level of arousal is relatively low, that is they are emotionally and physically calm. Other athletes experience their best performances at a mid-point between calm and aroused, while still others may find their **IDEAL PERFORMANCE STATE** to be a highly aroused level both physically and emotionally.

In summary, the first Crazy Rule: **SOMETIMES UP MEANS DOWN**, tells us two important things: First, that getting your arousal level too high up may cause your performance to actually go down. Second, sometimes psyching-up means that you bring your physical and emotional arousal levels down. That is, if before competition your sense of physical nervousness and emotional tension are so high that you feel that you've lost your **IDEAL PERFORMANCE STATE**, you may want to use relaxation and calming strategies to lower your arousal levels and bring yourself back to your **IDEAL PERFORMANCE STATE**. (Note:

The MIND PLUS MUSCLE Mental Training Room provides exercises for helping you attain your IDEAL PERFORMANCE STATE (http://www.mindplusrmuscle.com/html/mental_training_room.html)

Let's move on to the second Crazy Rule of psyching-up: DON'T GO TO PRACTICE. When first introduced to this Crazy Rule most athletes complain that this would be impossible. However, I argue that it is not impossible and that indeed by following this rule they will benefit greatly from every practice they engage in. Actually, the complete version of this rule states, DON'T GO TO PRACTICE, GO AND PRACTICE. This simply means that it is just not enough to show up for practice and follow a program that has been laid out for you. Practice should be a time when you work on something that is important to you.

In going and practicing something important to you, it allows you to set your own goals for practice and come away with a sense of accomplishment when you achieve those goals. In addition to focusing on skills you wish to improve upon, you may use practice as a time to work on identifying what feelings and thoughts were present when you are in your IDEAL PERFORMANCE STATE.

Sometimes this can be done by imagining that you are in actual competition, and practice at the same level of intensity that you would during a game. By trying out different levels of arousal, different mental strategies and different emotional levels during practice you can eventually identify your IDEAL PERFORMANCE STATE.

I cannot emphasize more strongly how important this second rule is for you, not only in developing more useful mental strategies, but in giving you an opportunity to feel good about yourself each time you go and practice or compete. By bringing your own goals to each practice or competition you are making it more meaningful and giving yourself the opportunity of having a satisfying experience in which you achieve something important to you.

Now let's move to the third Crazy Rule of Psyching-Up: THERE IS NO FAILURE ONLY FEEDBACK. Simply put, this means that we often learn more from our losses than we do from our victories. After a good performance we normally celebrate how well we performed and bask in the comfortable feelings of success. After a poor performance however, we often replay our performance in our minds, going back over critical errors that we feel contributed to the final outcome.

During these mental deliberations we often resolve not to make the same errors in the future. Therefore, we focus on improving our play much more intensely following a poor performance than following an excellent performance. In using the third Crazy Rule, it is not important whether this poor performance occurred during a win or a loss. What is important is that you spend time reviewing your poor performance and use this information to identify what you need to focus on in practice and what goals you will set for your training. This rule teaches us to apply one of the most powerful skills in all of Sport Psychology called Optimistic Reframing. Practicing this skill allows us to find something useful or beneficial in challenging or difficult situations. In this way we turn the negative performance into positive, goal-oriented feedback.