

## Psychological Skills Training and Mental Preparedness

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My initial reason for researching this subject was so that I could provide helpful resources to assist the Snickers® MYSA State Cup Championship teams compete more successfully at the regional level. The teams represent the “best of the best” in Minnesota, but some teams lacked the psychological competitive edge when facing competition against high caliber teams from the region. I reviewed numerous articles and books and I found in my research that the book, “The Champion Within” authored by Lauren Gregg with Tim Nash provides athletes with some of the best information on how to gain the psychological edge that is necessary for serious competition utilizing Colleen Hacker’s techniques. I also found that I could practice and implement some of the same techniques and skills she recommends for athletes, as an adult, in my practice as a Registered Nurse when faced with learning new nursing skills.

Now almost one year later, I have been so impressed with the techniques that I have learned, I feel that athletes and adults who are also facing personal challenges in their lives would benefit from Colleen Hacker’s expertise. I hope you also find this information helpful to you as you prepare for the 2002 soccer season.

This article summarizes some of the training beliefs used by Colleen Hacker as she worked with the 1996 U.S. Women’s Gold Medal Championship team. Pages 28-42 from “The Champion Within,” provide practical tips on how to deal with the psychological aspect of the beautiful game for the soccer athlete.

“Mental skills, like physical skills, can be learned and improved with practice and systematic training.” Colleen Hacker, U.S. Women’s Team Sport Psychologist.

- Athletes need the power of concentration and the ability to stay focused on what they are doing in practices and games. Just like being at your physical peak for competition, athletes need to learn how to be at their peak mentally. They must learn to get psyched up but not psyched out. Athletes must learn to deal with failure, injury and adversity.
- Players need to ascertain their psychological state in their performance and appreciate that they *have control over how they choose to respond to situations*. Confidence is a critical factor in performance. Confidence is derived from being prepared and working hard, being fit, knowing personal strengths and acknowledging them to yourself, overcoming obstacles, worrying about only what the athlete can control and acting “as if...”
- Player strengths will set apart an individual. Players need to be willing to “stand out.” This is tied to an understanding that the psychological dimension of an individual players training is related to their willingness to train hard and push themselves to achieve their goals.
- Players should utilize the psychological skills of imagery, goal setting, self-talk, controlling the jitters and performance preparation.
- It is helpful to develop a pre-game preparation plan that includes a consistent approach to matches. What works for you? The plan should be the same whether facing the best or worst opponent.
- It is helpful to develop good support systems. This needs to be not only friends and family, but someone with an objective ear—who can help you look at things in different ways, not just support what you believe.

### **Colleen Hacker's Personal Performance Tips**

There are simple techniques that can be used to help the athlete achieve a more consistent degree of optimal personal performance. Some of these include:

- Listen to music that stimulates feelings of competing well, strong and successfully. Ideally, you should combine listening to your own personal music tapes while imaging yourself performing in an actual game or on a practice field. Listening to your own tape, three to four times per week will help form a strong and powerful association between the music and your desired ideal performance.
- Create your own imagery videotape by filming your last several matches and editing important clips that capture how you want to look, feel, and perform on the soccer field. It is a not performance evaluation tape. The goal is not to critique, analyze or alter your performance.
- Rather, the tape should elicit feelings of control, confidence, and success. As you watch the video, you should re-create all the sensations and emotions that you would be feeling on the soccer field as if you were actually engaged in the activity. Some players prefer to have music during the video while others prefer it to be quiet with only visual pictures available.
- Practice the power of positive thinking. It is the one are of your life where you can exercise complete control. Positive thinking does not necessarily result in competitive success, but negative thinking almost always results in poorer performance and more negative expectations.

Mentally tough athletes have learned to gain control over their thoughts so that when they experience negative thoughts or emotions they are able to both stop and replace those images with more positive, success-oriented thinking. Instead, of trying to change negative thinking behavior, try replacing it. Use positive, present tense affirmations that convey, with great conviction, your belief in yourself, in your abilities, and in your chances of successfully executing the action at hand.