

The Art of Mental Training

Chapter 3

The Mental Edge

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Sports psychology studies what successful people do. One of the most profound things validated through study after study of many great athletes, is that if you take a group of athletes with equal ability and some receive mental training while others do not, the ones who were given mental training will always outperform those without. Why? Simple: because those who use mental training skills develop a *Mental Edge*.

Once, when I was young, my grandfather took me to see the legendary soccer player from Brazil – Pelé—at Tampa Stadium.

I'll never forget that warm summer night, as he dominated the game with three electrifying goals. That was a long time ago, but I'll always remember the way he dodged down the field, feinted and swerved on a dime to get past defenders, the ball seemingly glued to his feet—until he let it fly inside the goal posts.

Years later, I came across a story about Pelé in the writings of the late Gary Mack, a noted sports mental trainer with whom Pelé had shared what he considered to be the two keys to winning – *Enthusiasm and a Mental Edge*.

Pelé told Gary about the routine he used before every game he played. He would go into the locker room about an hour early and find a private corner in the locker room. Then he would lie down using a towel as a pillow and cover his eyes.

Pelé explained how he began to watch a film in his mind's eye: a film of himself as a kid playing soccer on the beach in Brazil. He let this “movie” bring back glorious memories of the sand, the warm sun on his back, the ocean breeze feathering his temples. He would vividly recall the thrill of the game, the joy that it brought to him, he would immerse himself in his love of the game, allowing himself to relive those glowing memories. Allowing himself to *feel* them.

In short, before every single game he played, Pelé made sure to put himself in touch with his pure love of his sport.

Then Pelé moved forward in his mental movie. Pelé described how he began to review and watch himself relive some of his greatest moments in world competitions. He talked about letting himself *feel* and enjoy the intensity of those *winning feelings* over and over again. He talked about how crucial it was for him to *make a strong connection with those feelings and images* in his past before he proceeded to imagine himself performing at his absolute peak in the upcoming event.

Finally Pelé told Gary that he would see himself as he was about to become: playing brilliantly, scoring goals, dribbling past defenders in a mental movie made up of positive images with strong *feelings* of enjoyment and triumph. He imagined everything before it ever happened: the crowd, the atmosphere, the field, his own team, his opponents, he saw himself playing irresistibly like a champion—as a force that could not be stopped. But most important, he told Gary, was to remember that it was not just about vision and imagery, but also about *feeling the emotions associated with success*. He pointed out that he vividly imagined how good it all felt.

Only after about a half-hour of relaxation and mental rehearsal, would Pelé begin to stretch and prepare his muscles for the job they had to do. By then he could relax because he had already primed his mind for victory. By the time he'd jogged into the stadium, he was (almost literally) unstoppable. Physically and mentally he was armed and fortified to win. No one could touch him.

In that short time with Gary, Pelé shared with us exactly how to tap into what he considered the two essential keys to winning: *Enthusiasm and a Mental Edge*.

I share this lesson with all my clients and suggest that they too create an internal place, a place where their minds can go before any event in order to rehearse, visualize, *feel*, and prepare exactly as Pelé used to. This is where you go to play and watch your “mental highlight tapes”; this is where you once again connect with the fun and love of your sport, to feel that winning feeling. Most of all, this is where you go to mentally prepare yourself and to gain the mental edge before battle.

For the athlete who's just starting out and who may not have past successes to replay, I suggest that they pretend that they do and that they watch themselves as if they did. After all, it's your movie!—you're its director and producer, its editor and writer; the more imagination you can squeeze into it the better. Mix in some enthusiasm with your imagery and now both of Pelé's keys to winning are in the formula. It's also important to practice seeing yourself overcoming adversity and staying in control whatever might arise. This doesn't make for arrogance—though it might sound like it. It creates confidence. Confidence is different from arrogance; and confidence is one of the keys to performing well.

Use the same routine that Pelé did to get things going for yourself. Practice mixing relaxation, imagery, feelings, and enthusiasm, prior to competition in a pre-game routine, in order to gain a mental edge and a sure sense of confidence going into the event. In this

lesson you have one of the most successful athletes in the world telling you how he went about preparing for competition.

Pearls of wisdom.

Remember: One must consistently practice mental skills and pre-game routines in order to tap one's full potential.