

# The Art of Mental Training

## Chapter 4

### Flying Navy Jets

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Shortly after arriving at Aviation Officer's Candidate School in Pensacola Florida, the young college grads get to meet their Drill Instructors.

The Marine Drill Instructors we had during those initial five months of aviation military indoctrination are the best the Marine Corps has to offer. These Drill Instructors had earned the right to be brought onboard Naval Aviation Schools Command, and their job was to seek out and eliminate any mentally weak candidates who may have found themselves wrongly assigned to the aviation program. They are methodical, effective, and professional in their approach, and they eventually get around to working on every single candidate. If you don't have a mental game, you're not likely to make it through. For those of us who survived, it was off to flight school as newly commissioned Naval Officers.

It wasn't long before one of my classmates sought me out for some advice regarding a certain flight instructor. Some of these instructors were pretty intense and the environment they were able to create from the back seat of the cockpit can make the mental part of any training mission very challenging. At any rate, my friend John had been told that he had to do a flight over again. Not good. In fact, if that happened twice he was in danger of being kicked out of flight school. In addition to that worry, he had some bad vibes about having to fly with that instructor again.

"Tell me what went wrong the last time," I suggested. "What was going through your head when it turned ugly?"

He tried to remember.

"Well, because of bad weather I was being vectored all around, which shifted the entire training mission on the spot. As I sought to regain control of the situation I kept thinking: Why me, why do I get the lousy weather? What is this instructor's problem, why is he gunning for me? What else can go wrong? What have I done to deserve all this hassle?"

John looked at me and shrugged. “You know how it is, some idiot instructor screaming at the top of his lungs, creating havoc, hitting switches, calling for emergency procedures, all that stuff!” John reflected for a second. “More than anything else, I remember feeling rushed.”

“Since you felt rushed, you probably did rush,” I told him, “And when that happens it interferes with our performance, whatever it is we’re trying to do. Rushing automatically increases tension, which causes more mistakes to happen. More mistakes bring on more tension. It’s a vicious cycle: the more mistakes we make, the more frustrating it becomes, and the easier it is for us to lose our mental focus . . . The rule is: don’t rush when the pressure’s on - *smooth is fast*. Breathe, pause, and learn to gather yourself – but never, ever, allow yourself to rush your game.”

“I also remember that I began to second-guess myself.” said John. “That didn’t help, either.”

“Right. If you begin to over-analyze the situation, that can kick-start a lot of negative self-talk. I remember when my martial arts instructor Leo-tai would notice, he’d shake his head, and tell me that I needed to start by shutting down the negative self-talk, that I needed to quit fighting myself.”

“How?” asked John.

“He taught me to interrupt any negative self-talk the instant I noticed it and replace it by firing off positive self-talk. Things like: I’m fast; I’m focused; I’m good. He always said not to let negative thoughts get in your way. You have to cancel the negativity and feed your self-belief instead. This will improve your concentration, and lower your level of tension, which will help you to perform better. Shutting down negative self-talk, begins by interrupting it, and then instantly replacing it.”

John was listening.

“That makes sense,” he admitted. “Trouble is, I still think that this guy is out to get me personally.”

“OK, so that makes him a serious opponent. And with a serious opponent you have to get a clear idea in your head of what you need in order to beat him. Once you are clear on what you must do to win, you have to stay focused on the most important task at hand, so that—no matter what he throws at you—he’s unable to disrupt your task-consciousness. You can’t let him rattle you, to come between you and what you intend to do. If he disrupts your task-consciousness, he wins—and you lose, especially in jet training. You’ve got to stay task-focused. You can’t let your opponent take that from you.”

“That’s exactly what happened last time we went up,” John admitted. “And that’s what really worries me. You know how crazy it gets up there. We’re moving really fast. Once

he rattled me, it all went downhill. Frankly, I'm a little spooked having to fly with this instructor again. I imagine it feels kind of like having to fight some guy who knocked you down before."

"Anyone can land a lucky punch," I told him. "Snap out of it. The past does not equal the future! Leave your bad experience with this guy in the past, where it belongs. Don't sabotage your next performance by feeding your brain negative feelings about an event that is still out in the future. The Art of Mental Training teaches that our performance action will follow the mental thoughts and images we entertain. In other words: you'll get what you see in your mind's eye. The brain helps you achieve your goals when you show it the results that you want it to produce for you, so be sure never to dwell on images or feelings of outcomes that you definitely don't want."

"Meaning?" asked John.

"Meaning that one of the most important things about competing at anything is learning how to enter a competition mentally prepared to do your best . . . Beyond shutting down the negative self-talk the instant it appears, I want you to work on connecting feelings and images of success with the precise event that lies before you. You have to show your mind what you want to have happen the next time you're flying with this instructor. And you have to start doing this type of mental training as far ahead of the actual event as possible."

Over the next couple of weeks, John set some time aside to practice some "Imagineering" (as you'll learn in a lesson that lies ahead) during daily relaxation sessions. During these times he allowed only images and feelings of victory and success to be associated in his mind with the upcoming event when he would meet his opponent.

Using his mind's eye, he imagined himself, in great detail, as the ultimate military aviation professional doing his very best under situations of extreme pressure. He practiced seeing and feeling himself having an intense ability to stay task-conscious and task-focused—no matter what. He could even see and feel himself shutting down any negative self-talk the instant it arose and replacing it with empowering self-talk.

His efforts paid off! John later told me how he had beaten his opponent the next two times they had met over the next several weeks: and today John is a seasoned captain flying with a major airline.

What this true story teaches us is that by using sports mental training techniques you can overcome obstacles that might otherwise have stopped you from achieving goals that are important to you outside the realm of sports. In other words, when used correctly, mental techniques can help you achieve your dreams.

**Remember: Interrupt negative self-talk and images the moment they arise, shut them down on the spot. Replace them with positive self-talk and positive images. Concentrate on showing your brain exactly what it is that you want to achieve, never dwell on what you do not want to happen.**