**1. Mental Toughness:**

As an athlete you must be able to “focus” on the things that you can control. High stress situations such as minor injury, or over stimulation adds on to the already demanding challenges a game already provides. Distractions like crowd noise or a chippy opponent often cause the mind to be affected.

Many life distractions come into the mix as well. It is essential to evaluate whether you have the motivation and commitment to continue playing, especially when leveling up calls for new challenges. Will you balance between demands and ability, and set goals at an appropriate level? This will provide a baseline in areas where more attention is needed.

Mental toughness is the ability to focus one’s attention on the most important things – and – sustain that focus throughout the duration of the contest or season. Managing stress (think breathing), shaking out tension spots, staying in the “now”, developing solid communications amongst teammates and coaches, overcoming adversity and injury, maintaining composure in victory and defeat are all factors that contribute to mental toughness.

Mental toughness also requires the player to “let go” of mistakes quickly and efficiently. Shifts in momentum can result in a hot streak and players that are not “at the ready” will not perform up to their ability level.

**2. Confidence:**

You must achieve and maintain a strong sense of self-belief to execute a skill or task successfully. There are levels of confidence: under confident, optimal confidence and overconfident.

Under confidence is caused by the lack of trust in your ability to perform. If a volleyball player has been successfully spiking the ball all game, then she gets blocked and now she doubts her ability to spike the ball, the base problem is mental. Athlete’s who appear tentative or are afraid to make a mistake characterize this base lack of confidence. On the other hand, optimal confidence leans towards overconfident. When performance is going well and mistakes are made, self-confidence is hardly moved.

However, overconfidence can hinder performance when one’s belief suggests they don’t really need to prepare for a competition, or they fail to perfect a specific skill, such as serving the ball. These things contribute to a lack of precision focus or less attention to the task-at-hand, causing aim to be off or a lack of force behind the ball. Athletes with this tendency are likely to “play down” to lesser competition.

**3. Relaxation/Arousal Control:**

You must understand the levels of arousal and know when it is appropriate to relax. Every athlete prepares for games and competitions differently. Volleyball players need to find the level of arousal that allows them to perform at their peak. Being over aroused can cause passing or setting the ball too hard, resulting in a missed direction or poor placement of the ball, or a missed spike or serve.

Athlete who have a strong mental fitness base take arousal level into account. Hence, they know when to take action calming the nervous system (breathing, autogenic training, cognitive-affective stress management training (SMT). Previous discussions in Podium have provided specific guidance in “how” an athlete can bring themselves back to an optimal level of arousal. Breathing properly is highly underrated and research has shown that poor breathing patterns actually interfere with functional movement. On the court this can cause repetitive mistakes at the worst times – and often appears to observers as “choking.”

**4. Attention/Concentration:**

You are subject to a lot of external distractions during volleyball games. These can cause you to be reactive, lose focus, get out of “your” game and stop playing in the “now moment”. Attentional skill is the ability to focus on the here and now of high stress situations and also being able to effectively broaden or narrow “focus” between internal and external factors. Concentration enables the athlete to selectively direct their attention to and from key factors during a game. The athlete’s ability to shift their attention efficiently from their own personal movement away from the ball, while noticing exactly where other players are on the court is key in player development. Add to that a quick recognition for the direction of the ball (predicting where it may go), while simultaneously being aware of where the net is, boundary lines are, and where they need to move on the court to be in the best position are essential to playing championship play. Maintaining attention and concentration throughout a full competition is difficult, but attainable, and must be trained as one of those tools in the athlete’s base mental fitness program.

**5. Imagery:**

You can improve more quickly by learning “how” to visualize certain skills in play. Imagery skills can come in handy when athletes are having trouble performing a specific task such as spiking or serving the ball to a specific target in the opponent’s court. Visualizing movement on the court, player positions, and “how” certain patterns in play unfold can be very helpful in your athlete’s development.

Imagery can be an internal process (visualizing and feeling the execution of a physical skill) or it can be an external process (seeing your opponents shifting positions on the court.) Having the control to vividly picture or re-create an explicit experience in the mind can increase performance and confidence.

Visualization is best learned by doing a “quick review” in one’s mind immediately after executing a skill. Instant replay of the sight, feel, and execution including the outcome is one way of learning to use imagery.

Learning these skills can help when a difficult situation arises and when the athlete has “already practiced” the drill dozens of times in their mind. The mind/body will already have a map of what to do, what to expect, and how to execute properly in that circumstance. The use of imagery over time helps your athlete memorize the task or skill, as it becomes more natural as well as a higher expectancy of success.

Volleyball players experience a lot of different mental challenges throughout a game. Constant adjustments and problem solving is required. These skills are meant to be something that coaches, consultants and players can bring to their attention to before problems arise. Knowing and practicing these skills and others can improve the mental fitness of every athlete, reinforce their focus and concentration on those factors they control and help them realize better individual play as well as team cohesion. Most training focuses on how physically tough the body is, but most often the mental toughness is under appreciated and left unaddressed by coaches and athletes alike. These mental skills are gaining in popularity because of the greater presence of sport psychology consultants working with championship teams. As a coach, parent or athlete it is a smart practice in developing the fundamentals to incorporate the mind and a mental fitness regimen might just play a major role in both player and team development.

