

The Mental Toughness Concept for South East Asia Athletes

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to critically analysing the mental toughness concept among athletes, especially in South East Asia. Some of what athletes thought were good, but would be best if we could re-analyzed again for improvement. Thus, this paper suggested four mental toughness issues need to be re-structured which seldom realized by coaches and athletes. The four are: 1) To improve mental toughness, one should improve their self-awareness, 2) To improve mental toughness, one should incorporate psychological skills together with physical and tactical skills, 3) To improve mental toughness, one should remained positive, 4) To improve mental toughness, research and development (R & D) consortium of South East Asia should be formed. Recommendations are also suggested in this paper.

Keywords: Mental toughness, athletes, re-engineered, and South East Asia athletes

“Mental toughness is having the natural or developed edge, that enables you to generally cope better than your opponents with the many demands (competition, training, and lifestyle) that sport places on a performer, and specifically, be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure (pg. 209)”

Jones, Hanton & Connaughton (2002)

What actually mental toughness means to most of us? Is what assumes by the laymen different from novice, intermediate and elite athletes? Is experience and non experience athletes at different level of performances perceived mental toughness differently? And Is South East Asian athletes understand it differently from European athletes? Well, there will be no right or wrong answers to this, unless a continuous scientific research has been conducted. In this paper, Jones et al. (2002) mental toughness will be used; “Mental toughness is having the natural or developed edge, that enables you to generally cope better than your opponents with the many demands (competition, training, and lifestyle) that sport places on a performer, and specifically, be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure (pg. 209)” More or less, it is about how individuals have the capability to cope and consistently perform better than opponent under pressure.

They also rank 12 attributes of mentally tough athletes (Table 1). In brief, the 12 attributes focus on unshakeable belief of their ability, having insatiable desire

Table 1. Jones, et al.’s (2002) the twelve attributes of mental toughness (pg. 211)

1. Having an unshakeable self-belief in your ability to achieve your competition goals.
2. Having an unshakeable self-belief that you possess unique qualities and abilities that make you better than your opponents.
3. Having an insatiable desire and internalized motives to succeed.
4. Bouncing back from performance set-backs as a result of increased determination to succeed.
5. Thriving on the pressure of competition.
6. Accepting that competition anxiety is inevitable and knowing that you can cope with it.
7. Not being adversely affected by others’ good and bad performances.
8. Remaining fully-focused in the face of personal life distractions.
9. Switching a sport focus on and off as required.
10. Remaining fully focused on the task at hand in the face of competition-specific distractions.
11. Pushing back the boundaries of physical and emotional pain, while still maintaining technique and effort under distress (in training and competition).
12. Regaining psychological control following unexpected, uncontrollable events (competition specific).

To compete, resilience ability, able to cope under pressure, able to handle anxiety, remaining fully-focused, and able to control their mind. Although Jones, Hanton and Connaughton (2007) have found mentally tough athletes especially at Olympic level have 30 attributes under 13 subcomponents within four overall dimensions (attitude/mindset, training, competition, and post competition), however, after examine it Jones's et al. (2002) attributes is more suitable for South East Asian athletes. How many of south East Asian coaches and athletes able to maintain and evaluate their mental toughness according to Jones et.al twelve's attributions? How many of us realized the importance of mental toughness, yet do nothing about it? The purpose of this paper is to explore more on how we should re-engineer the concepts of mental toughness among South East Asia in order to enhance our standard of sports at higher level. Some of the myths (The top myths, 2010) that will be faced by sports psychologist and coaches that they should prepare for are: "I am playing well right now. I do not want a mental coach to mess up my momentum." "Performing well is all about hard work and dedication, not mental stuff." "I don't want my opponents to find out I need mental help, and use it against me." "My coach would bench me if he knew my mind was getting in the way of my game." And "I just need more experience in competition and then I will perform better." These myths should be re-adjusted in a positive manner. Thus, in some extends, changes should be made on how coaches treats their athletes in training especially when considering the mental toughness issues. However, those changes need to be implemented gradually where knowledge and mental toughness training should be given first before any evaluation and monitoring could be made. All the changes were for long-run results and not for immediate changes in the outcome (Omar Fauzee, Yusof, & Jamalis, 2008).

Therefore, before it is too late for South East Asia athletes to improve their mental toughness abilities, thus, the purpose of this paper is to re-engineer mental toughness concept: 1) To improve mental toughness, one should improve their self-awareness, 2) To improve mental toughness, one should incorporate psychological skills together with physical and tactical skills, 3) To improve mental toughness, one should remained positive, 4) To improve mental toughness, research and development (R & D) consortium of South East Asia should be formed. The following section will critically discuss how to improve mental toughness especially for South East Asian athletes.

1) To improve mental toughness, one should improve their self-awareness

Although most Asian always proud of themselves but the problems with it was that they not really know who they were (Omar Fauzee, Yusof, & Jamalis, 2008). "I know who I am and I am already mentally tough' was what most of our athletes always assumed what they were, but in reality they were not aware of their own ability. How are they going to know their ability if they are not even know how to measure their awareness? The same is true with athletes who said "I am playing well right now. I do not want a mental coach to mess up my momentum." This individual did not understand that at peak performances, athletes should use psychological skills to maintain their momentum. For example Stacy Dragila (a world record holder medalist in pole vault) had used psychological skills over and over to maintain her performances. She was interviewed by Dr Ann Dahlkoetter before the Olympic trials in Sacramento:

Even when I enter a competitive event with an initial sense of nervousness, I turn that feeling into an expectation of success. I get this feeling of awesome power, an acute awareness, like there's nothing I can't do if I put my mind to it. It's a kind of knowing that comes from inside, that I can always jump higher. (Dahlkoetter, 2008, pg 26)

If our South East Asia Athletes' awareness is high, I believe we will beat Japan or Korea in footballs in coming years. To blame the athletes totally is not fair because some of them did not even introduce to psychological skills. In addition, many of our athletes do not have their psychological dairy log book. This is because we do not train our athletes to have the sense of awareness. They always rely on coaches and physical instructor to evaluate all those basic things about themselves. Perhaps some wouldn't care to know about their ability because they don't know what to do next. They always assumed that they know many things about themselves but actually they don't. Thus, a self-awareness program should be organized by sports administrator and the diary log book (Burton & Raedeke, 2008) of their mental toughness should be introduced to evaluate their progress.

2) To improve mental toughness, one should incorporate psychological skills together with physical and tactical skills

Some coaches believed that physical and tactical in training are more than enough. In other words, some coaches did not value sport psychology and they always mentioned that 'during their days' no psychological impetus was given but they still success. With poor knowledge in psychology, they will not bother to add in psychological skills during training (Omar Fauzee, et al. 2008). What will make the circumstances worst is when the athletes themselves avoid being counsel or getting advice from psychologist. Perhaps, this is due to the perception of "My coach would bench me if he knew my mind was getting in the way of my game." Thus, this situation will make both parties are not participating in learning psychological skills. The psychological input will help athletes to control performance imagery, to focus attention, and total commitment to enhance performances (Orlick & Partington, 1998). During competition all athletes have almost the same physical strength and skills, and what made athletes different from the others is their ability to overcome competition pressure. This was identified by Micheal Johnson (Three times Olympic gold medalist) in Kremer and Moran (2008):

*I have learned to cut all the unnecessary thoughts...on the track. I simply concentrate. I concentrate on the tangible-on the track, on the race, on the blocks, on the things I have to do. The crowd fades away and the other athletes disappear and now it's just me and this one lane.
(pg 94)*

If athletes don't have the capability to maintain their concentration, then they will unable to perform at their very best. In other words, the way of conducting a training session should not only focus on physical and tactical but should include the psychological skills. To make it worst, some athletes think that psychological skills should not be learned because it came naturally with experience. Some of them might says, "I just need more experience in competition and then I will perform better." This is not really true because the experience Tiger Woods also

need sport psychologist beside him to remain at the top. This is true according to sheard (2010), “mentally tough athletes are able to combine striving for personal excellence with competitive success (pg. 107).” Experience without any input of psychological skills will not make you great players.

3) To improve mental toughness, one should remained positive

The negative athletes will always makes excuses, while the positive athletes will always work hard to perform better. The negative thought such as “Performing well is all about hard work and dedication, not mental stuff” will make good performers less focus their psychological skills before competition (Highlen & Bennett, 1979; Meyers, Cooke, Cullen, & Liles, 1979). Their ways of thinking is on one side only, which means that they negatively ‘close’ their mind to use psychological skills. We should explain to this athlete that without psychological input, their dedication and hard work slowly decreased. Those who are interested to prolong their determination they should add the psychological values into their training.

Another challenge is that some of these athletes do not want to change their wrong belief or habits. Thus, if the behaviors they follow are positive, it will be beneficial for them, but if it was negative it will de-motivated them to move forward. For example, if we felt that we were too weak to compete, then we won’t perform. What make it worst was that all those negative thinking will de-motivate our athletes and coaches to move forward. In 2011, do you think that any South East Asia football team can qualify for World Cup Final round? Some will say yes, and many will say no. Can they beat the Asia giant’s team like Japan, Korea, and Australia? A good coach and athlete will not careless about what people said, what they do are developing program that focus on tactical, techniques, mental and emotional stability, and physical. Athletes will enjoy the experience being with the team if they had a positive coach, regardless of how a team did (Smoll & smith, 2006). Although Connaughton, Hanton, and Jones (2010) positive and negative critical incidents is benefit to maintain mental toughness, but this may not be the only reason that one cannot success in their performance. As long as a coach is positive, ‘charismatic’ and keep on learning all the strategies to improve the process and performance outcome for the players. On the other hand, to become a better team, they have to change their negative habits. Perhaps, our athletes should also be more positive in becoming top performers. Psychologically, individuals have to think positively to be a top performer. To do that the way of thinking, living and perception toward sport should be changed accordingly, so that they believe that they can be a champion. In other words, one should change to a more challenging zone.

4) To improve mental toughness, research and development (R & D) consortium of South East Asia should be formed

In most of South East Asia countries, we always make a small thing to become big. We always want changes in our program and we also like to make improvement without conducting research about it first. And to make it worst, we like to follow what others did especially the champion. It is good to follow from a champion, but in it is not always right. We just like to

follow them without analyzing it thoroughly. In other word, we are making changes without analyzing of our ability, mental strength, commitment, and physical skill. Some of the training is only good to some individuals but not appropriate to all. For example do you think that our athletes would train like what Lance Armstrong did during his childhood? In his bibliography he had mentioned;

Swimming is a demanding sport for a 12-year-old, and the City of Plano Swim Club was particularly intense. I swim for a man named Chris MacCurdy, who remains one of the best coaches I ever worked with. Within a year, Chris transformed me; I was fourth in the state in the 1,500-meter freestyle. He trained our team seriously: we had workouts every morning 5:30 to 7. Once I got little older I began to ride my bike to practice, ten miles through semi-dark early morning streets. I would swim 4,000 meters of laps before school and go back for another two-hour workout in the afternoon-another 6,000 meters. That was six miles a day in the water, plus a 20-mile bike ride. My mother let me do it for two reasons: she didn't have the option of driving me herself because she worked, and she knew that I needed to channel my temperament (pg. 22).

Should we follow what Armstrong had done, without knowing our athletes capability and circumstances? Another example, if American or Australian has a good program in sports, should we spend millions of dollars to follow their program? It does not mean that their programs suitable to us. We should conduct research and testing (mental and physical) whether the proposed program applicable or not with our system and our capabilities. We should call our own expert in sports to create and invent coaching strategies that suitable to Asian. The assessment through research is valuable for coaches to produce better training program, and according to Coach Dean Wurzberger;

Most coaches place a high value on determining the psychological strengths and weaknesses of the athletes they are coaching. In my experience, motivation and confidence are especially nig areas of interest of soccer coaches. From a practical standpoint many coaches would find psychological testing to be very similar to physical fitness testing. It can help us identify each individual's psychological strengths and weaknesses and then act on that knowledge by implementing an appropriate training program. (Leffingwell, Durand-Bush, Wurzberger, & Cada, 2005; pg. 87).

We should think forward by thinking of research and testing strategies that suitable to player's capability, mental ability, strength, and physical fitness that can produced a good 'process output'? One and for all, a twenty years Research and Development (R & D) budget in sporting and coaching programs should be the next agendas of Ministry of sport in many developing countries. Perhaps, a consortium of sports research of South East Asia countries should be formed, and perhaps in-conjunctions of this conference, the Thailand Ministry of Sport should make the first move to seek yearly research contributions from each ministry from every South East Asia countries.

Lastly, one should not aspect that only the elite athletes should be given mental training skills because they are competing at higher level, but it also should be started early so that when athletes mature they can mentally manage themselves (Hogg, 2003). It is important to learn and understand our mental ability. According to sheard (2010), "A hardened, disciplined mindset differentiates between the good and the great, especially at the highest level of competition. Being mentally tough reflects positive values: responsibility, self-belief, and positivity to challenge (pg. 107)." Furthermore, Bois, Sarrazin, southon, and Boiche (2009), indicated that. 'Our results indicate that most successful athletes were more cognitively and somatically anxious, used more frequently relaxation strategies, attentional control and emotional control and pursued more performance-approach goal and less performance-avoidance goal (pg. 266).' Moreover, with the help of psychological skills (e.g. imagery, coping strategies, anxiety, and mental skill training), we hope that our athletes will improve confidence, concentration, optimism and lower the anxiety level (Omar-Fauzee, Daud, Abdullah, & Rashid, 2008; Omar-Fauzee, Lai, Soh & Latif, 2008; Omar-Fauzee, See, Geok, & Latiff, 2008; Rattanakoses, et al., 2009; Sadeghi, Omar-Fauzee, Jamalis, Ab-Latif, & Cheric, 2010). Therefore, we as South-East Asia athletes and coaches should gain more knowledge on mental toughness, as well as conducting more comparative research among neighboring countries in South-East Asia. Thus, this will help our athletes maintain and improves performances.

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