GABE RUMMEL, MS

TOP ATHLETE HABITS

"As the parent of two athletes and budding multi-sport grandkids, I found myself personally relating to this book." — Bill B., Parent and Grandparent of Athletes

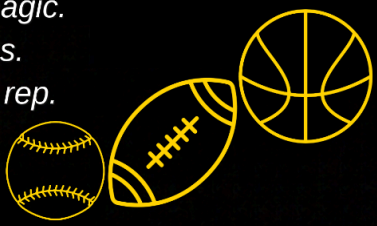
THE PARENT'S PLAYBOOK TO BUILD YOUR *ATHLETE'S MENTAL GAME* AND *PERFORMANCE*, WITHOUT EXTRA TIME OR BECOMING THEIR CAR-RIDE COACH



TAH-Dah! No, it's not magic.
TAH-Duh, it's obvious.
All it takes is one more rep.



VOLUME I





Top Athlete Habits, Volume I

The Parent's Playbook to Build Your Athlete's Mental Game and Performance, Without Extra Time or Becoming Their Car-Ride Coach

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Names and identifying details of the athletes and families in this book have been changed or left out to protect their privacy. Athletes, teams, and organizations mentioned by name are used for illustration only, and their mention does not mean they endorse this book.

Cover design by Gabe Rummel

First Edition, 2027



To my parents and wife, who gave me more chances than I'll ever know, so this passion project could grow into a service business for millions.

To my friends and family who are no longer here with us and left far too early. Your spirits are still with us all.

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Introduction:

Back To The Beginning

"Put in the work, you'll make it."

Gabe Rummel, 2017, via X

TAH-Dah is what a magician says when the trick is done. The curtain drops, the crowd claps, and nobody thinks about the hours of practice behind it.

Sports work the same way. We see the dunk, the signing day photo, and the draft night hug. We almost never see the years that built those moments.

Now say TAH-Dah a little slower and it starts to sound like "duh." That's the point of this book. The habits behind great athletes are not a secret, and they make sense the second you hear them. So why are so few families training them on purpose?

Before we get to your son or daughter, I want to share three stories from three very different levels of sport. One is an NBA player, one is a Division I player turned coach, and one is a semi-skinny kid who just wanted to dunk. From the outside, each story looks like a magic moment. From the inside, each one was built on the same thing, the mental habits behind the physical ones.

Those habits line up with the three Cs we train at TAH, which are Clarity, Confidence, and Composure. As you read, keep your own athlete in mind. Their story is still being written, and you have more say in it than you think.

Too Skinny, No Offers, 47 Points

In fifth grade, I shared a class with a kid I barely knew. We joked around and had a good time, but we weren't best friends. Gym class was a different story. Anything with a basketball, heck, anything gym-class related, he was the best in the room. Even then, he moved like a future pro.

By freshman year he was moved up to the sophomore basketball team while I started on the freshman team. That was a big jump for me. Two years earlier I sat in the middle of the B team, with roughly 30 kids ahead of me. You can bet I made that leap because of how I spent that summer. My schedule was cross country at 8 a.m., basketball training in the neighborhood at 10, the pool at 1, more neighborhood basketball at 5, then rinse and repeat, with the occasional trip to the farm to work with my grandpa.

He kept climbing every year. When he made varsity, I played sophomore ball. When he started on varsity, I was on the JV practice squad. By our senior year, my job was to guard him every day in practice, and my top goal was to beat him.

He dunked on me far more than I dunked on him, but I got him a few times (almost). One day some scouts came to practice, and I hit three threes in a row. One scout asked, "Who's this guy?" and pointed at me. All I could think was, "Wow, how neat is that? I'm actually hitting threes when it counts for once." A coach told him it was the best he'd ever seen me play, and the whole gym laughed, including me.

However, there's another part to this story that surprises people. Those scouts didn't come running for my friend either. He had one Division I offer and a few Division II looks. The doubters said he was too skinny and not

explosive enough. They called him underdeveloped. Does that sound like something your family has heard?

So he took the path most kids don't take. He spent a year at a prep school called DME Academy in Florida. On his first day in that gym, he worked so hard he threw up. Then he kept showing up, building muscle, building his basketball IQ, and sharpening his game.

That year earned him a scholarship to the University of Iowa. He learned behind great players as a freshman. As a sophomore he took off, helped Iowa win the Big Ten Tournament, and was drafted fourth overall by the Sacramento Kings in 2022.

In December 2023, the kid who was too skinny with no great offers out of high school scored 47 points in one NBA game, hitting 12 three-pointers against the Utah Jazz.[4]

His name is Keegan Murray. His twin brother, Kris, spent most of those years being compared to Keegan and overlooked next to him. Kris carved his own path and showed the sports world that he and his brother are two different players. The Portland Trail Blazers drafted him in the first round in 2023.

My teammates and I never doubted Keegan or Kris for one minute. We didn't know how they would get there, but we knew they would at least make it to the next level out of high school, and most likely go as far as they wanted to go.

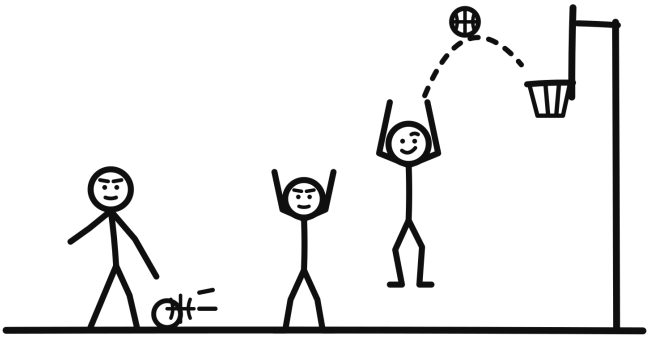

Fig 0.1 Too skinny, no offers, 47 points. The offers showed up after the work, not before it.

The Murrays' offers showed up after the work, not before it. That's clarity. They had a clear picture of where they were going long before anyone else saw it, even when they weren't sure how they'd get there. Their confidence came from proof they stacked up one rep at a time, especially when nobody else believed. It took composure to stay steady while the doubters talked and the offers didn't come. Your athlete can build all three the same way.

One Phone Call to Utah

Long before she was a Division I coach, she was a high schooler hoping somebody would notice and give her a shot. She went to soccer practices, team trainings, ID camps, and private sessions with a great trainer. Through all of it, she kept wondering if a college offer bigger than NAIA would ever come.

Finally, a Division I program reached out, and she committed with her best friend. Then everything shifted on her. The coach who recruited her ended up only coaching the men's team, and the new women's coach turned into about the worst experience a player could have. That coach was fired a few short years later, and word travels fast in college sports, especially soccer.

So the incoming junior soccer player transferred to a university across the country that she had never even toured. She talked to the coach on the phone one time. He told her, "I don't know for sure what your role will be on this team, but I know you'd be a great person to have on it," and that cemented the plan for her. It also stretched one long-distance relationship a lot farther, but more on that in a minute.

She landed on a much better team than the one that first recruited her, but her playing time was limited. She had played defender her whole life. Now she moved to forward, then wing, then wherever the coach needed her. She pushed so hard in training that one day she ended up in the hospital from a seizure on the field due to exhaustion.

She kept going anyway. She finished five years of college soccer and an MBA, moved back home, and lined up a corporate financial management sales job. She also took a high school women's soccer head coaching job and an NAIA women's soccer assistant coaching job, because she couldn't stay away from the game.

She wasn't chasing a coaching career. She was taking the next opportunity in front of her, giving herself options using the two resources she had the most of, time and youth. Then one day the phone rang. Her old school in

Utah wanted to know if she would come back as a Division I assistant coach.

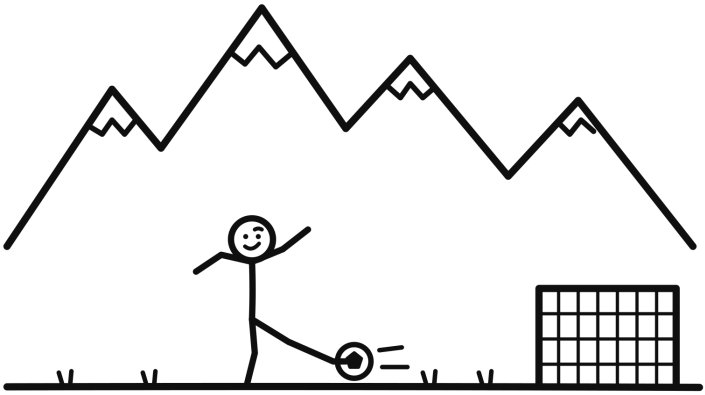

Fig 0.2 One clear next step led her back to Utah.

She said yes and moved back to Utah. Her name was Angie Knies for most of this story. Today she's Angie Rummel, because she married me.

Angie never had the whole path mapped out. What she had was clarity about what she loved and what her next step was. She had a knack for confidence, not fully knowing what the next step would bring, but trusting it was in the right direction. When her first school fell apart, her position kept changing, and a seizure put her in the hospital, her composure kept her moving forward. Your student-athlete doesn't need to see the top of the mountain. They need to see the next stepping stone, and then take it with a clear, confident, composed step.

Laughed At for Wanting to Dunk

I don't love talking about high school, but it sets the stage. You should know what level of athlete I was, because the people who support your kid in every part of their life come from all different levels. I've seen the Keegan Murray level, the Angie Rummel level, and my own, as the athlete and as the coach, trainer, or supporter.

Back in high school, I had a choice. You see, half my family was all-state for choir or band, and the other half had their life revolve around sports. Either way, school always came first. So, I could go the music route, or I could go all in on athletics. I chose athletics, and the guitar came into my life later.

My freshman year, I was a small, skinny kid who stepped into a weight room with no idea what I was doing. My friends loaded 135 pounds on the bar for my first squat, and it did not go well, to say the least. That spring, my high jump personal record was 5'2".

I kept hitting the weights and fighting through knee and back pain, but my jump barely moved. I remember one basketball practice where I finished first in suicides, just from pure effort, and then had to sit on the sideline because my lower back was so tight I literally could not move. Sophomore year I jumped 5'4". Junior year I hit a whopping 5'6", and that was on my very last jump of the season. Things were looking bleak at best.

I loved athleticism, quickness, and explosiveness, and I really wanted to dunk. People made fun of me for it, and some of it crossed the line into bullying. Even the kids who laughed would admit I just kept going and doing my thing.

Senior year, I planned to skip track so I could focus only on dunking. Thankfully, a great coach, Coach Schwarz, pulled me back in. He told me I wouldn't have to run the longer sprints. All I had to do was the short sprint workouts, plyometrics, and the hurdles I already ran.

The Year It Clicked

That summer going into my senior year, something changed. I started talking and working with a trainer online named Ben Patrick for explosive athleticism and flexibility. Back then he wasn't famous, and now he has millions of followers as the KneesOverToesGuy. Between his unorthodox workouts, our phone calls, and my drive, it clicked.

People couldn't make fun of me anymore. I was squatting deeper than most of the guys around me. I was also flexible enough to do the splits. Any and all knee or low back pain went away. I dunked, and then I dunked again, and again. In warm-up lines, I was floating above the rim to lay the ball in.

I dislocated my shoulder working out that senior year summer. It would then pop out almost every time I flipped over the bar onto the mat or hung onto the rim. It's a weird feeling to hang on the rim and feel your shoulder slip, or to flip over a bar taller than you and get up with your shoulder popped out. I kept jumping anyway. That season I cleared 6'1" and went to state in the high jump. The same 5'11" kid who jumped 5'2" as a freshman was now jumping 11 inches higher.

The big goal, the setbacks, and the sacrifices all paid off. None of it happened in one magic moment. It happened in hundreds of reps where nobody was watching.

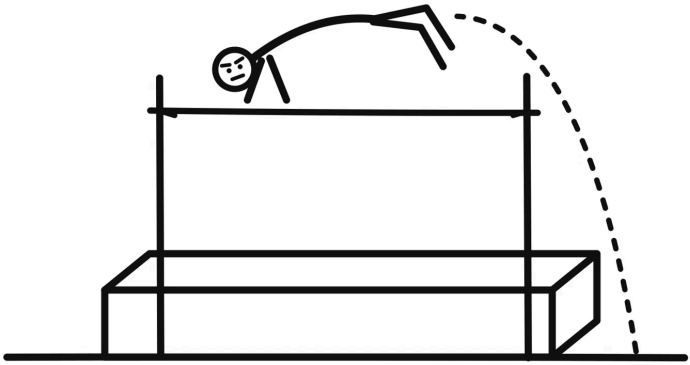

Fig 0.3 From 5'2" to 6'1", one inch at a time, in hundreds of reps where nobody was watching.

I had clarity about one goal, and I held onto it even when people laughed at me. My confidence came from proof, one inch at a time, from 5'2" to 6'1", and from touching the rim, to hanging on with one hand, to grabbing it with two hands off one foot or two. It all started as a picture I painted in my mind. Composure kept me jumping with a shoulder that wouldn't stay in place, and kept me pushing through the early morning suicides and last-lap track drills, when it felt like my dreams were on the line. If your athlete is stuck at their own 5'2" bar right now, that is not the end of their story. It's the start of it.

What Nobody Could See

Getting to state in the high jump wasn't the hardest thing I would face. The hardest test came later, and nobody could see it, or see it coming.

In high school, I wasn't anything special on the court. I played JV, ran the scout team, and helped our JV team,

nicknamed Crispy Chicken, go undefeated. So after high school, I focused on academics and research. I switched out of engineering at the last minute and into Iowa State's concurrent diet and exercise program, where I focused on dietetics, exercise science, and an emphasis on neuroscience and stress research.

Then my body gave out. During COVID, we left the dorms early as freshmen, everything shut down, and I got Lyme disease. Tests were hard to get, and every doctor assumed I just had COVID. I ended up in the hospital with heart attacks, nerve damage that paralyzed the left side of my face, meningitis, and organ failure.

My blood tests showed heart enzymes off the charts, which meant my heart was having multiple mini heart attacks. It's a different feeling when shooting pains run up your face to your forehead and down your left arm, or when you feel your heart stop and then race a million miles a minute. It all finally made sense when the ER tested for something other than COVID, and found out it was Lyme disease.

Recovery took a month, and the hospital visits lasted for years after. I lived with heart palpitations and wondered daily when my heart might give out. If I lay on my side or had any alcohol, I ran the risk of it beating like a racecar. Finally, one doctor told me that every test said I was fine, even though they still saw irregular beats and an enlarged heart. His advice was to go live my life and come back if something felt off.

It was set in stone. I had a big heart, literally, like the Grinch when he finally comes around on Christmas. So I did what any rational person would do. I ran a marathon, and I decided it was time to let it go.

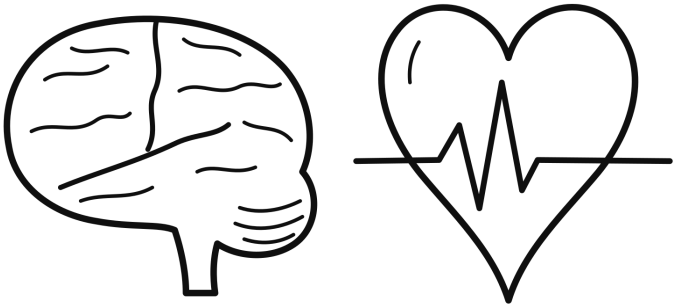

Fig 0.4 A big heart shows up on a scan. A battle in the mind doesn't.

During that same stretch, I watched family and friends fight their own silent battles. For some of them, help came too late. When others finally told people what they were going through, I saw how much harder their fight had been than mine.

Doctors could draw my blood and see my struggle on paper. Nobody could see theirs, and that scared me.

That's what composure means to me. It means staying steady when nobody has answers yet. Your athlete needs that same skill after a bad game, a benching, or a coach who won't explain why. And it's not only for the hard moments. Your athlete needs it after the big win too, finding the quiet and asking, "What's next?"

So, what do these three stories have in common? It comes down to the mental game. The Murrays, Angie, and I all needed clarity, confidence, and composure long before anyone saw the result. The stat sheet shows you what happened on the field or in the game, but it doesn't show

you what your athlete is carrying inside, or rather, what they are strengthening inside. The mental side is real, even when nobody can see it, and it can be trained.

From The Athletes Health to Top Athlete Habits

I started The Athletes Health in college as a blog and health coaching business while I was recovering from Lyme disease. I was getting function back in the left side of my face, trying to manage my heart, and praying my friends and family would recover. The idea was to combine mindset with nutrition and fitness. Athletes live the most disciplined health routines out there, so I built it around them, in the hopes to help others. Hence the name, The Athletes Health.

As I worked with adults, the same thing kept coming up. I taught them what to do, but they struggled to do it. Every conversation came back to behavior change.

Then came the effects of COVID on the next generation. I watched kids struggle with behavior change and their social lives at the same time. I knew something had to change, and I knew it had to start earlier.

So The Athletes Health grew into a mental performance business for youth athletes. In 2027, it got a new name, Top Athlete Habits. The initials stayed TAH, because the mission hasn't changed since 2024.

That's where our 3C framework comes from. It's a system of mental exercises that helps student-athletes recognize, train, strengthen, and sharpen top athlete habits. Clarity shows them where they're going. Confidence gives them

proof they can get there. Composure keeps them steady when things go wrong, which they inevitably will.

Together, those habits help them perform their best in sports, and for life. It's the performance pulse of their game, the heartbeat in the middle of the sport and the middle of life. It carries them toward the summit and through the valleys along the way.

That's what this book is for. You'll learn what your athlete is up against, why mental training is not counseling, and how the three Cs build on each other. You'll also get simple mental exercises you can start at your own dinner table, just like reps in the weight room. The best part is that these exercises don't add any extra time to your day, because we build them on top of what you and your student-athlete already do.

Training Notes for Coaches

Coaches, think about the three stories in this chapter. Each athlete had a coach who saw the work long before the results showed up. This week, pick one athlete on your roster and point out one piece of unseen work you noticed, like extra reps, a better attitude, or a strong reset after a mistake.

Your First Step

Tonight, ask your athlete one question. "What's one thing you did this week that nobody saw?" Then listen without fixing, coaching, or grading the answer.

You're showing them that the work behind the scenes counts, and that you see it. You're showing them that you're here to listen, and that change is brewing in the training. So, without further ado, let's get to work.

Go Deeper: *Watch this chapter's free Huddle video and grab the Guided Reps training sheet at topathletehabits.com/intro.*

Chapter 1:

If They Just Won't Listen

> ***"Seek first to understand, then to be understood."***
>
> Stephen R. Covey

The final buzzer sounds. You grab your keys and wait by the car, already replaying the game in your head. Your athlete climbs in, drops their bag on the floor, and stares out the window. You ask how it went. You get a shrug, a one-word answer, and earbuds in for the rest of the ride home.

Plenty of parents know that car ride. The quiet stings, because you love this kid and you've driven them to every single practice. At some point, everyone in sports stops listening to someone. Athletes tune out parents, parents tune out coaches, and coaches tune out athletes.

Most of the time, they care plenty. It's simply that nobody is speaking the same language.

This book gives you that language. Before we start the climb, let's talk about who this book is for and what you'll walk away with.

Parent, Coach, and Student-Athlete

It doesn't matter which seat you sit in. Every athlete in the introduction had a parent, a coach, and their own drive

pushing them up the mountain. The Murrays, Angie, and I didn't get there alone, and your athlete won't either.

No matter who you are, you'll walk away from this book with something you can do, not just something you know.

Each person in this group won't listen to the others at times, and that happens in every family and every locker room. But when everyone shares the same language, and understands what we're doing, how we're doing it, and why, real growth happens.

Improving Performance In Sports, For Life

Being a student-athlete builds habits that last far longer than one season. You learn to block your time, juggle school and practice, and show up when you're tired. Those habits follow you into the classroom, the job, and life itself.

Picture a room full of 100 women who run major companies. 94 of them played sports growing up, and more than half played in college.[17] The early mornings, the tough losses, and the coach who pushed them hard all showed up again years later in the boardroom.

That's what we train at TAH, Top Athlete Habits. It's TAH-Dah, like magic, or so it seems, and TAH-Duh, obvious, once you see it. It makes sense, but almost nobody talks about it, and even fewer people train it.

Everything we train for sports crosses directly into life.

Sports do more than build athletes. A large review of youth sports research found that kids who play organized sports tend to have higher self-esteem, better social skills, and fewer symptoms of depression than kids who don't, and team sports showed the strongest benefits.[15] The game is

already teaching your athlete life skills, and mental training helps them keep those skills for good.

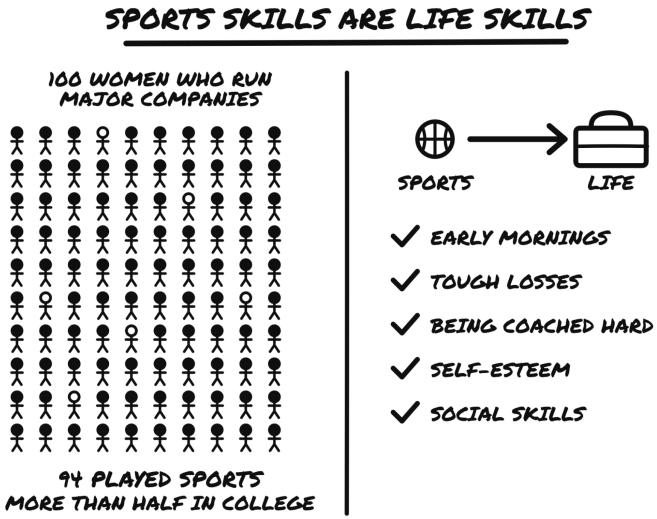

Fig 1.1 Sports skills show up again in life.

This Book Is for You, Parent

I get where you're coming from. Some teenagers barely talk to their parents, and I was one of them. Some families have a rocky relationship. Some parents are also the coach, and that brings its own challenges to the dinner table. Some families, on the other hand, talk about everything.

These families share one thing in common, and that's sports. Sports can be spectacular. Sports can also be scary.

I had a teammate who got chewed out after every single game. Even on nights I thought he played great, doing things I couldn't dream of doing on the court, his dad saw

it differently. You could hear the dad from across the gym, or see him in the car, yelling about that one turnover or that missed shot. That young man is an adult now. To my knowledge, he still hasn't fully recovered from those "postgame pep talks."

Now, picture the opposite. It's the same car ride, but this time your athlete is the one talking. They tell you about the play they're proud of, and the one that's still eating at them. This book is for you, so you can understand the mental game, grow the relationship, and turn those car rides into conversations that build your athlete up instead of breaking them down, make them stronger and more resilient, and bring the two of you closer.

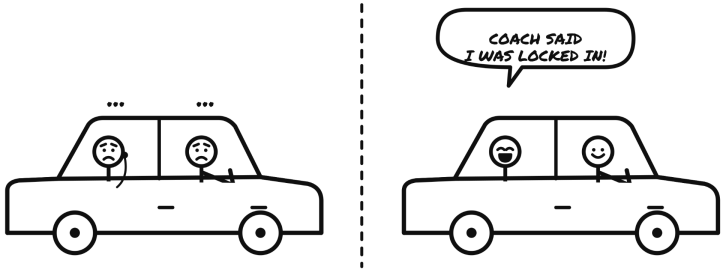

Fig 1.2 Same car ride, a whole new conversation.

Fun and winning feed each other. When the mental game gets stronger, performance follows, and so does the joy of the game you've invested so much in. More joy means better performance, and that puts more W's on the record.

For Coaches Reading Along

There's a good chance you're a parent too. Maybe you've been the parent-coach. Maybe now you coach other

people's kids. Either way, you already have a ton of wisdom.

I want you to sprinkle one or two pieces from this book on top of what you already do. Small tweaks that bring the mental game into your practices, games, and coaching style can make a huge difference, and you don't need new technology or a whole new system to start. That said, we have both at TAH for you.

Think about the coach you still remember. You can probably still hear their voice in your head. The best coaches get invited to graduations and weddings. They get a text out of nowhere ten years later that says, "I still think about what you told me." That happens at every level, from peewee to the pros. I'm glad you're riding along, so take what fits and add it to your philosophy.

For Athletes Reading Over Your Shoulder

Soak this in, but most of all, go do it. I would rather you read five pages and actually use them than read the whole book and do nothing. Knowledge alone won't change your game, but knowledgeable reps will.

That's why we only add one mental exercise a week in our actual training. If you have the workbook, use it. Use the free Huddle videos and training sheets linked at the end of every chapter. Follow us on social media for free mental exercises, reach out to us, and talk to your parents and coaches. Those conversations build you up.

Nobody gets stronger by reading about squats. You get stronger by getting under the bar, rep after rep, progressively loading it up. Your mind works the same way, and it matters just as much, if not more. The higher

you climb in your sport, the thinner the air gets, and the more the mental game becomes the difference maker.

The best time to start training your mind was years ago. The second best time is now.

What You'll Walk Away With

From this playbook alone, you'll walk away with a training framework, a greater understanding of the mental game in youth sports, and simple mental exercises that elite athletes use every day. They come from sport and performance psychology research, and they show up where it counts, in practice, in games, and in the numbers.

You'll learn more about yourself and the mental game. You might even become a better leader along the way. This isn't a leadership book, but leadership tends to follow the strengthened mental game.

Picture your athlete at the free throw line with the game on the line, on the mat with the meet riding on it, at the plate with the bases loaded in the bottom of the 7th, or standing over a putt on the 18th hole.

The gym is loud, but inside they're calm. They take a breath, run their routine, and let it fly. That's the athlete this book helps you build, a stronger performer who stays cool, calm, and collected when it matters most.

Trust me, I know reading isn't always the most fun. I also know that when you're busy, it's the last thing on the list. That's why I kept this book short and made an ebook version too. Instead of mindlessly doomscrolling, you can take a few minutes away from social media, read a few pages, and apply the information right then and there.

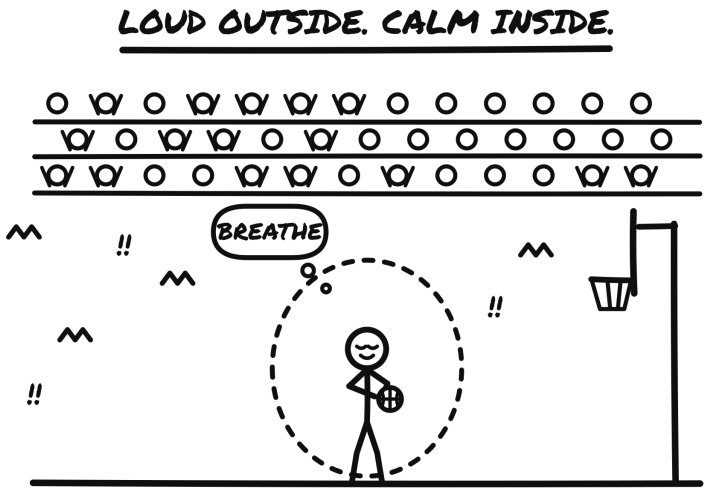

Fig 1.3 Loud outside, calm inside.

And please don't think this book knocks on counseling. Counseling matters, but it's not what we're doing here, and Chapter 3 explains the difference. This book isn't about talking through problems or going through the motions. This is training, and just like your student-athletes push their bodies to the limits to perform at their peak, we are pushing the mind for peak performance. We'll get into all this in the upcoming chapters of this book.

Whenever you find something useful in this book, go apply it. Talk about it with other parents and coaches, and help spread the word about TAH mental training.

First, we need to understand why this matters so much right now. That's where we're headed next, because sports have grown up faster than our kids.



Training Notes for Coaches

Coaches, the car ride home starts in your postgame huddle. Before your athletes leave, ask one open-ended question, like "What's one play you're proud of today?" and let a few of them answer. It builds pride, and you're modeling the same conversation you want parents to have on the drive home.

Your Next Step

If they won't listen, maybe it's time to listen first. This week, ask your athlete one open-ended question about their sport, then go one level deeper. Try, "What was the best part of practice today?" Then follow it with, "What made it the best part?"

You don't have to climb the whole mountain this week. Just get into the foothills. One real conversation is one heartbeat of the performance pulse, and that's where the big difference begins.

Go Deeper: *Watch this chapter's free Huddle video and grab the Guided Reps training sheet at topathletehabits.com/ch1.*

Chapter 2:

Sports Grew Up Faster Than Our Kids

> ***"The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way."***
>
> Marcus Aurelius

Picture your athlete at 15. Their phone buzzes at dinner. A club coach wants to know if they can make a showcase three states away. A kid they play against just posted a college commitment video. A local business is asking about an NIL deal. If this isn't your student-athlete, I promise it's one of their teammates.

None of this existed when you were in high school. It didn't exist when I was in high school, and that was less than 10 years ago.

Your athlete is growing up in a sports world that grew up faster than they did. Your athlete is the one climbing this mountain, and you're the one right beside them. Before you can help them climb it well, you need to see how steep it has become.

A Billion-Dollar Industry, a 15-Year-Old Kid

What other industry lets kids bring home millions of dollars for their families? Hollywood might be the only other one. We've seen how that story ends for many child actors. Not all of them, but too many never find their footing again.

The business of sports is starting to look the same, and the sharks are already circling. When I was in college at Iowa State University, a star guard at a Big 12 school signed a contract with an agent that would give the agent 25% of every contract he signed, for the rest of his career, and he didn't know what he was agreeing to. In other words, for every $4 he ever earns playing basketball, $1 walks out the door to someone else, forever.

It doesn't stop at college. Middle schoolers and high schoolers are signing NIL deals now. In most places they can't wear their school uniform or logo in the ads, so the photo shoot happens in plain clothes. Now a 16-year-old isn't only trying to get recruited and win games for their school. A local gas station or soda shop is also waiting to see a return on its money.

Some parents feel the weight too. They've poured thousands of dollars into lessons, travel, and gear, and somewhere along the way the investment started to come with an expectation. A scholarship has to pay it all back. Your student-athlete can feel that, even if nobody says it out loud.

Parents in the U.S. now spend more than $40 billion a year on youth sports.[56] That number is only rising. Let's bring that down to your kitchen table. The average family spends

about $1,016 a year on one child's main sport, up 46% in just five years, while inflation rose about 23% over the same stretch, so costs climbed about twice as fast. Add their other teams, and it's close to $1,500 per kid, every year. That's only the average. Basketball costs alone more than doubled.[3] That's billions of dollars built around kids who still need a ride to practice.

And the crowd keeps growing. About 27.3 million kids ages 6 to 17 played on a sports team or took lessons in 2023, more than half of all kids in the country.[51] A record 8.26 million students played high school sports in the 2024-25 school year, almost 200,000 more than the year before.[40] In Iowa, my home state, about 68% of kids ages 6 to 17 played sports in 2022, the second highest rate in the country behind Vermont.[2] Picture an Iowa classroom of 25 kids. About 17 of them are on a team, and every one of them is learning to handle pressure, with or without help.

The Pros Are Dripping Down

Tournaments are turning into vacations. I'm not against that. I actually see a ton of benefits in it! If your athlete gets to travel, play the game they love, and hang out with their team at the hotel pool, that sounds like an unforgettable time. I played on a travel team, and I loved it.

The problem starts when parents live through their athletes, when whole markets are built on kids, and when the equipment bill for one season of baseball or softball makes you wince at checkout.

Kids are specializing in one sport younger and younger, and many parents believe that's the only way. The way I

like to say it, the pros are dripping down into youth sports.

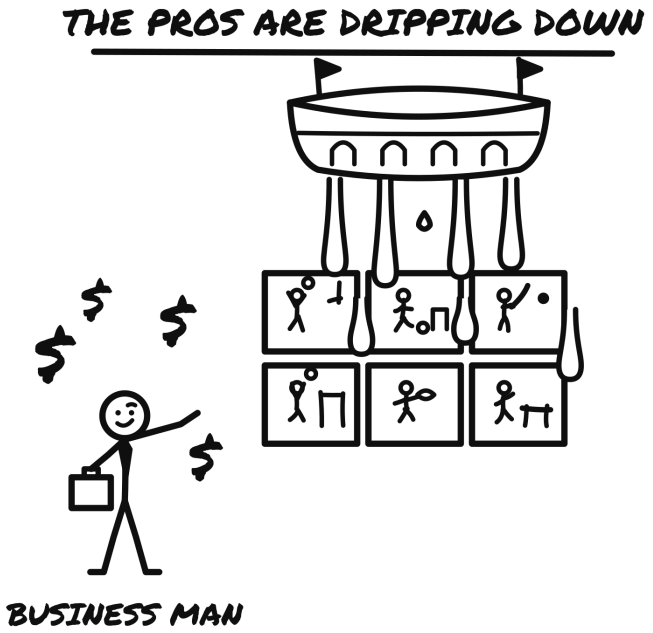

Fig 2.1 The business of the pros drips down into youth sports.

College sports is a full business now. With NIL and the transfer portal, students follow the money. The rules keep changing, and I've watched them change multiple times in a few short months. By the time you read this, they may have changed again.

Follow the money, and you'll see where high school and youth sports are heading next. I've been inside college locker rooms and boardrooms. Whether we like it or not, they are a business.

Even getting noticed has changed. I was talking with a high school junior basketball player who was working toward a college commitment. She told me she'd just gone to a big camp. I asked what it was about. She shrugged and said, "It's basically the tryout camp. You have to go to get eyes on you." The high school games aren't enough anymore.

Nobody has seen this before. Outside of AI, I'm not sure anything has grown this fast. The pressure and the stakes are uncharted territory, and your student-athlete is the one walking into it.

We Train the Body Six Days a Week

Look at everything we do for the body. Weight room, speed training, strength training, and plyometrics, often six days a week.

Then comes the recovery side. Stim, cupping, massage guns, massages, red light, Biofreeze, and Tiger Balm, you name it. And I haven't even touched on sleep, how much it matters and how little of it kids, and people, get today. We'll get to that in Chapter 8. We have doctors, physical therapists, athletic trainers, strength coaches, and sport specialists. Every one of them is there to help your student-athlete become the best athlete they can be.

There are also plenty of "gurus" online. You might be thinking, "Gabe, aren't you one of them?" I'd push back on that. I've been in youth sports long enough, and worked with enough well-known names, to see the parts of this industry that chase money over kids. That's not why I'm here.

At the elite and Olympic level, the very level youth sports is copying, the job never shuts off. If it doesn't work, you're out. It's a business at every level.

Sometimes the body pays first. When kids specialize too young, the same joints, muscles, tendons, and ligaments take the same stress all year long. Picture 10 baseball players going in for Tommy John elbow surgery. In one study, about 6 of them were teenagers between 15 and 19.[16] A surgery built for major league pitchers is now happening to kids who are still in high school and even younger.

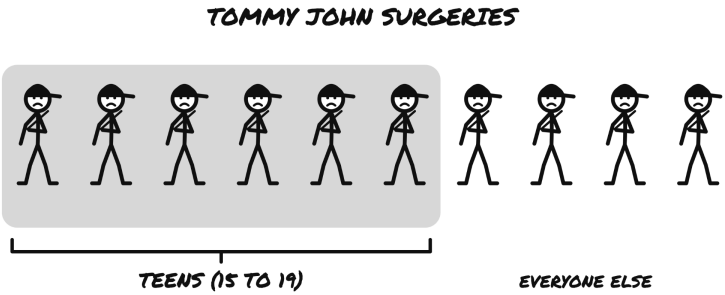

Fig 2.2 About 6 in 10 Tommy John surgeries are on teenagers.

Elbows are only one piece of it. A meta-analysis found that highly specialized young athletes had about 1.8 times the risk of overuse injuries compared with athletes who spread their time across sports. Picture two teammates, one who plays three sports and one who plays the same sport all year. The one-sport athlete is almost twice as likely to get hurt from overuse.[6] It's yet another reason to question the trend of specializing so young.

There's a time to focus on one sport and sharpen it. There are also so many good reasons to play other sports and

simply be a kid. For reference, the American Academy of Pediatrics suggests waiting until about age 15 or 16 to specialize, if your athlete specializes at all.[7] Even then, does that mean only one sport? Or could they still run track or play golf for a different skill set and a different mental challenge?

So after all the lifting, the recovery, and the long tournament weekends, what happens when the game still doesn't go your athlete's way? Every game has a winner and a loser. Who is teaching your athlete to handle the wins? Who is teaching them to handle the losses?

And the Mind Gets Zero

That's where the mind should come in. Most of the time, it gets zero. Zero attention, teaching, or focus.

When people hear the word "mental," they think counseling. We'll dig into that in the next chapter, because counseling is only one small piece of what the mental game can be, and it's a piece we don't do.

Where the Lines Cross

Picture a big X on a chart. One line is physical training, and it starts high. The other line is mental training, and it starts low.

When your athlete first starts a sport, they need the fundamentals. They don't need much mental training yet, maybe just enough to keep them from getting so frustrated they quit. I've coached speed and agility at a youth performance gym, and at that age we make every drill feel like a game.

Then the lines start moving toward each other. At some point they meet in the middle, and the mental game becomes just as important as the physical one. From there, the mental side keeps climbing until it's the thing that separates athletes.

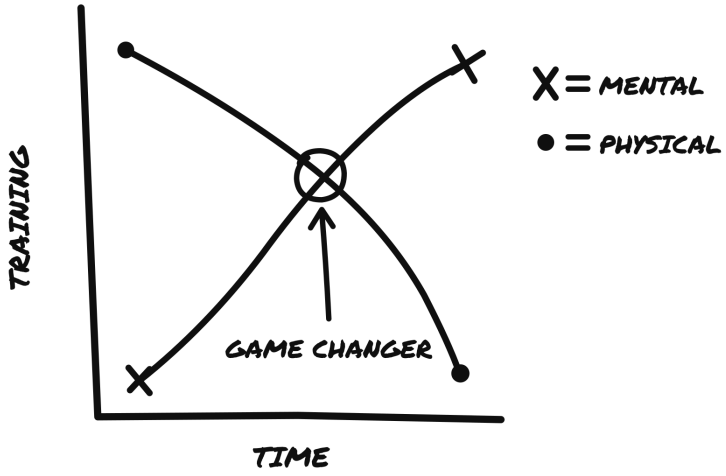

Fig 2.3 Physical reps start the gains. Mental reps finish them.

The greats knew this. John Wooden started every UCLA season by teaching his players how to put on their socks and lace their shoes, because the fundamentals mattered that much. Michael Jordan built his game on the basics too, starting with chest passes out in the hallway. Kobe Bryant was known for outworking everyone, and that work started in his mind. Those routines and habits are mental training.

Here in Iowa, Ed Banach and his twin brother, Lou, wrestled for the Hawkeyes and both won Olympic gold in

1984. Ed wrestled his gold medal match with a concussion, his 15th on the road to the Games.[42] Now, I don't want your athlete pushing through head injuries, and they shouldn't. That story shows how powerful the mind is, how driven and in control one can be, and why it needs to be trained with professionalism and care. I'm fortunate enough to have sat down with Ed multiple times while at ISU.

Still, the mental game gets almost zero attention. When it does get attention, very few people know how to actually train it.

What Zero Looks Like

I see what zero looks like all the time. Or at least, I see parents who have run out of ideas for how to train it. Every one of these is a real kid I've worked with.

A sixth-grade golfer who was one of the kindest kids you'll ever meet. On the range, he looked like a natural. On the course, one or two bad shots and it was over. You could see it take over his whole body, and the rest of the round went with it.

A hitter who could connect with anything in practice. Pitch after pitch, line drives everywhere. Then game day came, and he stepped into the box with a hundred thoughts in his head. He had no routine to come back to, so he overthought every pitch and walked back to the dugout all in his head wondering what happened.

A fourth grader on the football field who was a hothead. He was so far ahead of his teammates physically that he yelled when everyone else couldn't keep up. He had a leader inside him, just waiting to be trained the right way so he could grow and blossom. His parents had tried to show

him how to lead, but they weren't speaking the same language, and the message never landed in a way a fourth grader could understand.

A super tall basketball player who was too scared to dunk. The height was there, and the bounce was there, but fear stood in the way. Once we trained it, this athlete started dunking every chance he had. You'll see exactly how we did it in Chapter 5.

And families where the line between parent and coach got so blurry that the car ride home turned into a second practice. We had to draw a clear line, with sports staying on the court and the field, and home staying home, because sports was starting to come between them.

Then there are the good problems. Some of the athletes I work with are already playing amazing. They're starting, they're winning, and people are starting to watch. They're standing on one peak and looking up at the next one. Their question is how to get to the next level, and how to handle the attention, expectations, and pressure that come with success. Those are problems every family wants to have, and they still take training to handle well. Picture a freshman who makes the varsity volleyball team and suddenly has seniors, coaches, and a packed gym watching every serve. You'll meet her in Chapter 7.

Maybe you saw your own student-athlete in one of those stories. Every one of these kids had the physical talent. What they were missing was mental training, and every one of them was able to build it. Whether your athlete is struggling or soaring, the mental game is what carries them to the next step.

The Mountain Got Steeper

I'm working on my MBA while I write this book, and the more I learn about the business of sports, the more complicated, and clear, it looks. And it isn't slowing down anytime soon, but the people at the center of it are still kids. Even the college athletes and programs we work with are made up of young adults.

When your athlete was younger, they looked up at college players and thought, "That's where I want to be." Now those same players are managing NIL money, transfer decisions, and thousands of fans, often while they're still figuring out who they are.

The mountain got taller, steeper, and more crowded while your athlete was still learning to climb. The pulse of the game is faster than ever. You can't slow the industry down, but you can get your athlete ready for it. It's time their training meets the moment.

Training Notes for Coaches

Coaches, draw the X for your team at the start of the season and ask your athletes where they think they are on it. Then build one mental rep into a drill you already run, like a reset after a missed rep. You don't need extra practice time to start training the mind.

Your Next Step

This week, grab a piece of paper and draw that X with your athlete. Ask them where they think they are on it. Are they still learning the basics, near the middle, or past it? Then ask, "What do you do right now to train your mind?"

If the answer is nothing, that's okay. Every athlete starts there, and the next chapter shows you what mental training really is. Then build one mental rep into something your athlete already does at home or at school. Heck, give them this book to read too. It shouldn't scare them, it should excite them.

Go Deeper: *Watch this chapter's free Huddle video and grab the Guided Reps training sheet at topathletehabits.com/ch2.*

Chapter 3:

Mental Training Is Not Counseling

> ***"Everyone is going through something that we can't see."***
>
> Kevin Love

Picture two doors at the end of a school hallway. One says Weight Room. The other says Counselor. Now watch which one a 15-year-old boy walks through while his friends are watching.

Most families only know about those two doors. One builds the body, and the other is where you go when something is wrong. This chapter is about a third door, the one almost nobody knows is there, but everyone should be entering.

Where This Comes From

In high school, I spent almost every day after school in the gym. I experimented, watched what other people were doing, stacked plyo boxes, and asked anyone who would talk to me about their training. In college, I became a personal trainer, a health coach, and a group fitness instructor. I wanted to know one thing. How do people get from point A to whatever their point B is?

That's where I first stumbled onto the mental side. Very few people pushed harder than I did, and some barely

pushed at all. At practice I'd be the one leading, and then a few naturally gifted kids would crush it at meets. Something besides the body was deciding who showed up when it counted.

Then I watched people struggle mentally, and I took a step back to look at the whole picture.

On the physical side, the path was clear. You sprint, you lift, you run your push, pull, and leg days, and you squat, bench, deadlift, and clean. If you get hurt, you see a doctor or a physical therapist. Everybody knows how that works.

On the mental side, all I knew about was the school counselor, the school psychologist, and outside counseling. That was the whole list. I read about Tim Grover, the trainer behind Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant, and how he pushed their mindset and mentality. Later I learned he was a trainer, not a mental performance coach. In reality, he was both and then some, an all-around performance coach.

Then I found the mental performance coaches in golf, then baseball, then basketball, and I followed some great ones. A few friends who went on to be very successful players in their individual sports met with them once or twice. I would pick their brains about their experiences. That's when it clicked for me. This is a real thing.

There was still a gap. A high school or middle school boy is not going to walk into a counselor's office to talk about his problems, at least not until we flip the script. So I asked myself a question. Can we fill that gap?

Fixing vs. Building

When most people hear the words counseling or therapy, the first thing that comes to mind is fixing. You're going to get fixed. That's what I hear from most of the parents and athletes I talk with for the first time, and it doesn't sound very fun.

Now think about the weight room. Nobody walks in there to get fixed. You walk in to get built.

I remember walking into the high school weight room for the first time as a freshman. I didn't own a single weight at home yet. I looked around at the racks and the plates and thought, this is insane. That's when I went home and my parents helped me order a starter weight set, because I was going to build something. Later on, we added a taped speed ladder and a pull-up bar in the basement, and eventually I outgrew that starter set. What felt embarrassing at the start kept getting built, and it's still being built.

The mental side works the exact same way, but most people never think of it like that. Picture every athlete at your son or daughter's school who lifts, runs, or practices this week. Now count how many of them are actually injured. It's a handful at most. Everyone else is training.

With the mental side, we have it flipped. We assume anyone working on their mind must have a problem, or must be hurt. In reality, most of them would get everything they need by training. Nobody walks into calculus already knowing calculus. If you pass a pretest, it's because you learned the material somewhere before. Mental exercises work the same way. Most athletes have never been taught the mental exercises. A great strength coach or sport coach might slip one or two in along the way, but that's about it.

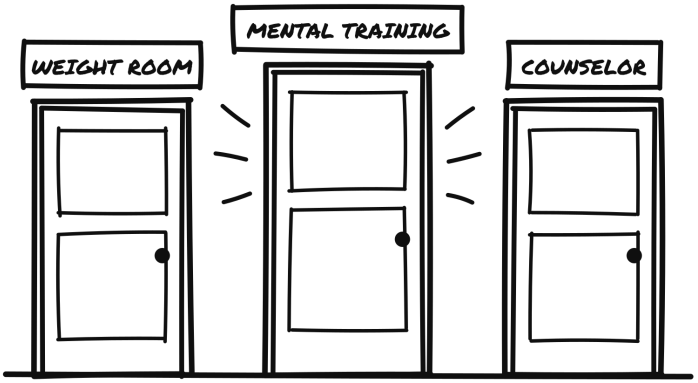

Fig 3.1 Most families only know two doors. The third one is where athletes get built.

So we build and train, and those words matter. If we ever meet an athlete who is truly hurting, with signs of depression or anything bigger than performance, we don't try to train through it. We refer them to a counselor or therapist, because that's a different lane and those professionals are there for a reason, and they're great at it. Counselors are needed, and we're grateful for them. But our lane at TAH is training.

Researchers have a great way to picture this. Instead of one line running from sick to healthy, picture two separate lines. One runs from mental illness to no illness. The other runs from struggling to thriving. Sociologist Corey Keyes showed that these really are two different scales.[26] A kid can have no diagnosis at all and still feel stuck, frustrated, and far from their best. Another kid can be working through something real with a counselor and still be training to play great.

Think of it like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the pyramid from Psychology 101. The bottom levels are the basics, like food, safety, and feeling like you belong. Once those are covered, a person can really chase their full potential at the top.[36] Mental health in sports works a lot like that pyramid. The International Society of Sport Psychology maps athletes across levels, from active mental illness at the bottom, to everyday functioning in the middle, to peak performance at the top.[47] Counselors and clinicians own the lower levels, and they're the experts there. We work the upper levels, helping a healthy athlete climb toward their peak. When we see signs that belong lower on the map, we refer out.

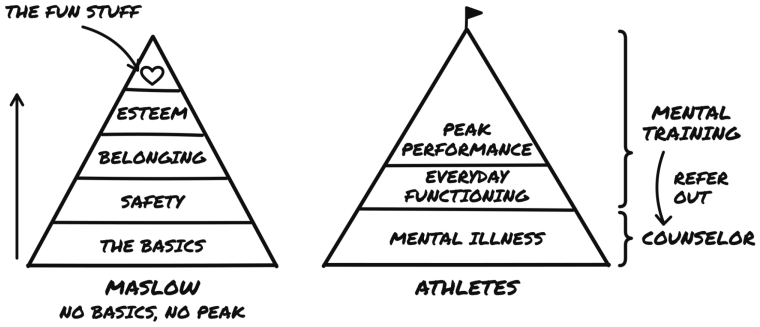

Fig 3.2 No basics, no peak.

Thankfully, many athletes already have those lower levels covered and are ready to chase peak performance. Others aren't as fortunate, and that's exactly why counselors matter so much. I also see plenty of kids who start to wear a label like anxiety as part of who they are, when in some cases, they simply haven't been trained yet. It's like eating junk food your whole life because nobody ever taught you which foods are processed and which ones are whole. Only

a professional can tell those situations apart, so when we're unsure, we refer out.

That's also why I love Dr. Jeff Duke's 3D coaching model.[14] The first dimension is the physical side, the fundamentals, drills, strength, and conditioning that most programs already train well. The top dimension is the heart, an athlete's identity and character, who they are when the jersey comes off. Those are traits we measure, but can't train. That's up to the individual. The psychological side sits right in the middle, connecting the two, and it's the dimension that gets skipped the most. That middle is where we live at TAH.

Think of a ladder leaning against your athlete's mountain. The counselor holds the bottom rungs steady, and the mental performance coach helps on the top rungs. Your athlete may need both, and they're holding the same ladder. Or they may only need the top rungs. When an athlete gets trained early, they can often work through a challenge before it pulls them further down, and get through that valley or over that mountain. If they ever do need the bottom rungs, the counselor is right there.

At TAH, we also measure progress. We make the invisible visible by tracking the athlete's own ratings over time. A large review of athlete monitoring found that athletes' own self-reported measures picked up changes in how they were handling training better than many common objective tests.[46] That's why we at TAH take pride in the mental training tracking technology we use and keep improving.

Why “Mental” Became a Scary Word

Alright, you’re here reading this, dedicating the time to this book, so I’ll admit something about myself I don’t always tell people. I love ghost shows. Ghosts, aliens, Bigfoot, I’ll watch all of it. Do I believe in Sasquatch? No, not really, but I still like watching and thinking about the lore.

Those ghost shows love old mental asylums, because they’re supposedly haunted. Think about what happened in those places, though. People were locked away, and many were given lobotomies. No wonder the word mental picked up such a dark feeling. Add in counselors being called shrinks, and the word got even scarier.

That stigma still shows up in locker rooms today. When researchers asked young elite athletes what kept them from getting mental health help, stigma was the biggest barrier they named. Others included not knowing much about mental health and bad past experiences asking for help.[20] That’s why the word training matters so much. An athlete who would never walk into a counselor’s office will walk into a training session.

Sports carried that fear for a long time. Twenty years ago, MLB players rarely talked about the mental game. Today every MLB team provides mental health support for its players, usually through a counselor or clinician, and many teams also have a mental performance coach on staff to handle the performance side. Think of it like the physical side. A doctor treats the injury, and a strength coach builds the athlete. Both matter, and they’re different jobs.

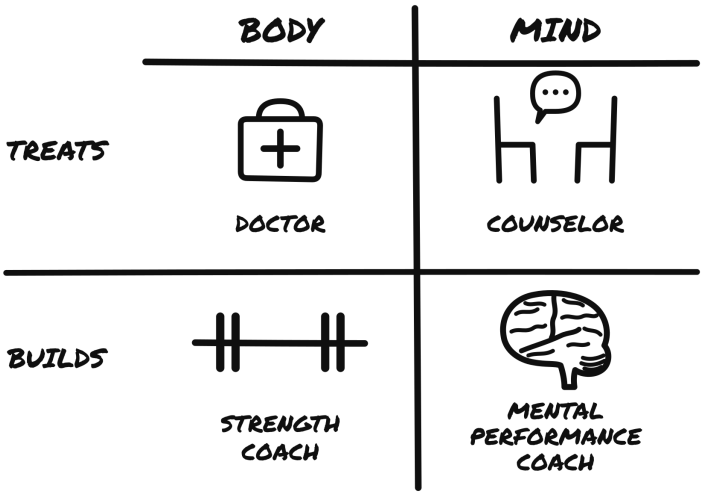

Fig 3.3 Some people treat and some people build. Your athlete needs to be built.

Other leagues and schools set it up in their own ways. In the NWSL (National Women's Soccer League), the players' union agreement now has every club employing at least two mental health professionals, a licensed mental health provider for clinical care and a mental performance coach for the performance side.[24,43] In the NFL, every team is required to have a licensed behavioral health clinician, and many teams want that person supporting and trained in performance too.[41] At the University of Iowa, the athletic department already has sport psychology on staff. Programs like football and women's basketball still bring in an outside expert, Dr. Carmen Tebbe, because they want her performance expertise on top of the provided resources.

That split is the whole point. Counseling and performance training can live side by side. You could even drop the word mental and just call it performance training.

Remember the X from Chapter 2? First the physical side carries the sport, and then the mental side takes over. Mental became a scary word because nobody could see it. Once you can see it, it's a whole different ball game.

A Weight Room for the Mind

So let's walk into the weight room for the mind. A mental performance coach, specifically at TAH, is a trainer for your student-athlete's mind and mentality. We build the vision of where they're going, set goals, handle pressure, filter out the noise, and stay focused, and the list keeps going.

It works just like the bench press. The more times you bench, the stronger you get. The heavier you bench, the stronger you get. When your athlete handles a bigger pressure moment, they get better at handling pressure. If they stop training, they lose strength, the same way they would on the bench. People ask me all the time, "Wait, is this physical or mental?" My answer is yes. That's because we tie the mental into what they're already doing physically.

Studies show this works too. Researchers pooled 35 studies of psychological training with athletes, and the athletes who trained their mentality and their minds performed better than the athletes who didn't. The boost was moderate, and it was still there weeks after the training ended.[9] Think about two teams with the same talent and

the same practice plan. The team that also trains the mind and their mentality walks in with an edge that lasts.

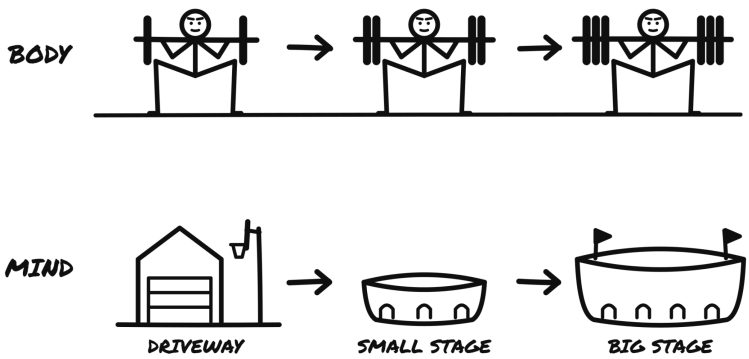

Fig 3.4 Add weight, get stronger. Add pressure, get steadier.

A newer meta-analysis looked at one kind of mental training, mindfulness, across 11 studies with athletes. First, we need to define mindfulness, and any other mental training topic we discuss. We'll define mindfulness as the ability to be aware of your thoughts in the present moment. Picture 100 athletes who never did the training. The average trained athlete performed better than about 82 of them. They scored higher on flow, that zone where everything clicks, than about 93 of them, and they had less anxiety, the worry, than about 81 of them.[49] While the sample was small, with only 11 studies, the pattern was strong. Same talent, same practice plan, and one group doing mental training.

That's the outcome of mental training, and that's where the solution starts. We aren't counseling or consoling, we're training. The rest of this book shows you how that training

works, with a few real mental exercises along the way so you can see it for yourself, and go out and use it.

You've seen the mountain your athlete is up against. Now you get to see how they train for the climb, and how they keep their performance pulse beating steady the whole way up.

Training Notes for Coaches

Coaches, words matter in your locker room. Swap "Get your head right" for "Let's build this." When an athlete is struggling with something bigger than performance, know who your school counselor is and make the referral. Training and counseling can work side by side on your staff.

Your Next Step

Try a new question at home this week. Instead of asking your athlete if something is wrong, ask what they want to build. "What's one part of your mental game you want to get stronger this season?" Then listen to the answer. They may say, "What?" with that classic attitude, but you just walked through the third door together, or at least put it in their line of sight.

Go Deeper: *Watch this chapter's free Huddle video and grab the Guided Reps training sheet at topathletehabits.com/ch3.*

Chapter 4:

Clarity, Confidence, Composure

> ***"The score takes care of itself."***
>
> Bill Walsh

A parent of a 9-year-old once told me, "We've been a sports family our whole lives, and we're already seeing it with him. The highs and lows of the game are hard for him to handle." That could just as easily be the parent of a 19-year-old. The ups and downs show up at every age.

That family didn't need a pep talk. They needed a plan their son could use every day. TAH started almost five years ago as a blog and a health coaching business, with some yoga mixed in. In 2024, we stopped the health coaching and went all in on mental performance training for athletes.



Fig 4.1 The first TAH logo draft, 2022.

After a year of talking with families, coaches, and athletes to make sure this was worth pursuing, I started my second master's in 2025 in sport and performance psychology and went full-time entrepreneur. It hasn't been easy. In fact, it's been very, very hard, and very, very worth it. Through all that work with student-athletes, their teams, coaches, and programs, one plan has become our training cornerstone, the 3 Cs.

How the 3 Cs Build on Each Other

Think about your heartbeat. You never have to tell your heart to beat. The heart is one of the only muscles in your body that sets its own rhythm. It has a built-in pacemaker, so it keeps the beat without the brain telling it to. It's the lifeblood of your body.

The 3 Cs are the lifeblood of your athlete's performance. Once they're trained, they keep beating under pressure without your athlete having to think about them. That's the performance pulse.

Every year, I do some kind of race to challenge myself and stay cardiovascularly fit, usually a triathlon or a marathon, and now a marathon every year. One summer my cousin called and asked if I wanted to go on a hike. I said sure, why not. Then he told me which hike, Pikes Peak, one of Colorado's famous fourteeners at over 14,000 feet. We trained a little, but standing at the bottom and looking up was intimidating. My spirits were high anyway, and this tall task of a climb was the 3 Cs in action.

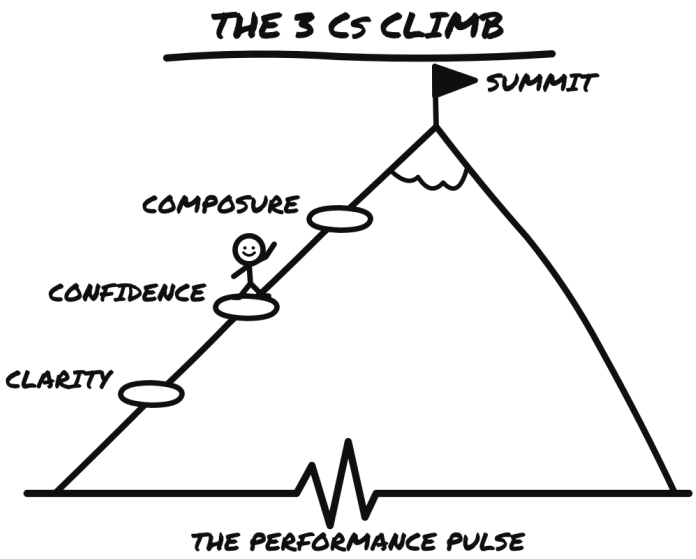

Fig 4.2 The climb up Pikes Peak, metaphorically.

Clarity

Clarity is looking up at the mountain, seeing the summit, and mapping the steps to get there. It covers vision, goal setting, planning, and knowing what you're walking into, among other topics. Without it, your student-athlete walks in circles. You know, the cartoon where the characters keep passing the same tree and say, "Haven't we been here before?" That's an athlete without clarity.

Clarity can change along the way, and it should. It's still the base everything else stands on.

Confidence

Confidence sits in the middle, and I think the middle is the best spot. It's also the spot parents worry about most.

When parents, coaches, and athletes come to us, confidence and composure are tied for the number one thing they ask for. We track a lot of different mental training traits and topics, but the performance and training almost always come back to confidence.

Confidence answers one question. We can see where we're going, so are we prepared to get there? Once your student-athlete believes they are, they start climbing, and they need to keep that confidence the whole way up.

Composure

Composure is woven right into confidence. It likes to hide, and it shows up most when your athlete needs it and loses it. It's the bad call, the missed free throw, the moment they lose their grip on themselves and on the game.

Composure is keeping that cool confidence while their eyes stay on the summit. When the fog rolls in and they can't see the top, composure keeps them climbing. If it's trained, they can get it back. If it's not, they lose it for the rest of the performance.

Weaving the 3 Cs Together

Think of the 3 Cs like a braid. They weave together, but they also go in order. Clarity shows the summit, confidence gets your athlete climbing, and composure keeps them on the trail. Each one is so important it gets its own chapter, and someday, its own book.

Another way to remember them is the following. Clarity is the vision, confidence is the preset, and composure is the reset. The vision shows your athlete where they're going. The preset is everything they do before the big moment, so

they walk in ready. The reset is how they come back when the moment goes sideways.

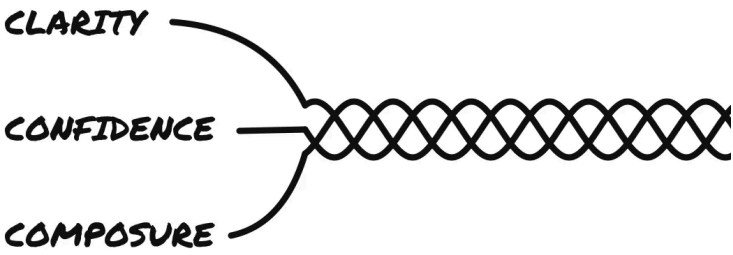

Fig 4.3 The 3 Cs are stronger woven together.

If you want each one in a single line, here they are. Clarity is knowing where you're going, why it matters, and what your next step is. Confidence is trust in yourself over a feeling. Composure is the ability to control your thoughts, emotions, and actions when the moment gets hard. Energy is the fuel behind all three, the ability to produce the effort, focus, and intensity your performance requires, on command.

Reps, Not Pep Talks

Every training session we run has action behind it. A pep talk feels good for a night. Reps change what your student-athlete does on game day, in the big moment that everyone prays goes well.

That's one of the biggest differences between training and counseling. Counseling often centers on talking things through, which has real value in its place. In training, we talk so we can do. Every session ends with a mental exercise your athlete takes into the performance, onto the

court, the field, the course, or wherever your athlete competes.

The strength and conditioning room runs on a simple formula. Movement plus resistance, repeated over time, builds muscle. Mental training runs on the same formula. A mental exercise, repeated over time, builds resilience. We put it into practice with the 3 Rs, which are reps, routines, and results. Reps are the mental exercises themselves, tied often to a physical action. Routines lock those reps into your athlete's day, so they happen without a fight. Results are the proof, tracked so your athlete can see their own growth on paper (or screen).

Go back to that 9-year-old and his family. They didn't need more speeches about handling the highs and lows. They needed to know the summit he was climbing toward, confidence routines to keep him steady, and a way to reset when the game went sideways. That's the 3 Cs, and those are reps.

You Only See What You Know to Look For

In our workshops, I love playing a little game with the room. We put up a picture full of hidden images and ask the room what they see. Most people spot one or two. Then we tell them what to look for, like the young lady or old lady illusion, or the hidden images in famous logos, and suddenly everyone sees them. They were there the whole time.

The 3 Cs work the same way. Once you know them, you'll start seeing them everywhere. You'll notice the clarity in your athlete's eyes when they talk about a goal they actually care about. You'll see confidence in the way they walk to

the plate. You'll catch the moment composure slips, maybe a slammed helmet or a slow walk back to the bench, and you'll know exactly which C needs work.

Before, those moments probably looked like attitude, a bad day, or "just being a teenager." Now they become information. That's why I love having this specific framework honed in, and why I love that we created it. It turns a mystery into a map, and trust me, parents feel the difference fast.

What Top Athletes Have in Common

Studies show the best athletes in the world share the same mental habits. Researchers interviewed 10 U.S. Olympic champions, who had won 32 Olympic medals between them, along with their coaches and parents. The champions had a lot in common. They could cope with and control anxiety, they were confident, they set goals, they were mentally tough, and they could focus and block out distractions.[19] We build mental exercises around every one of those.

So, line those up next to the 3 Cs. Goal setting is clarity, being confident is the second C, and controlling anxiety while blocking out distractions is composure. The champions also said these habits were built over years, with help from the parents and coaches around them. Nobody handed them a gold medal mindset. Somebody helped them train it, and that somebody can be you.

The 3 Cs in Every Sport

We've used the 3 Cs with football players and golfers, cross country runners and volleyball players, wrestlers, sprinters, soccer players, and hockey players. We've used them with more basketball, baseball, and softball players than I can count. The sport changes the setting, but the 3 Cs stay the same.

Think about a few of our football linemen. They were leaders on their team for three straight years, and they were working to earn looks from college recruiters. They were big, strong kids who already had the physical side handled. Their clarity was the goal of playing at the next level. Their confidence came from stacking proof through film and reps. Their composure showed up on a Friday night when recruiters were in the stands and the first snap went sideways. They used the same 3 Cs as everyone else, just with a lot more pads and a lot bigger appetites. Their mental exercises might have been slightly different, but the outcome was the same, to win and stay mentally locked in.

Now picture a cross country runner at mile two of a 5K. Nobody is passing them the ball, and nobody is calling a timeout. It's just their thoughts, their breathing, and their heartbeat while their legs, lungs, and body burn. Clarity tells them the pace they planned. Confidence reminds them of every hill they have already climbed in training. Composure keeps the voice in their head from talking them into slowing down. I run at least one marathon a year, so believe me, I know that voice well. It's a different sport with the same performance pulse.

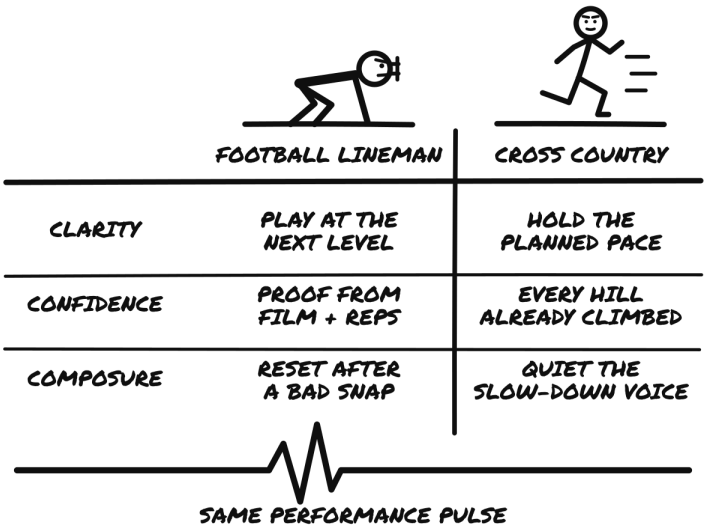

Fig 4.4 Different sport, same performance pulse.

What the 3 Cs Look Like at Home

You don't need a coaching license to spot the 3 Cs. You just need to know what to watch and listen for.

Low clarity sounds like "I don't know" when you ask what they want from the season. It looks like an athlete going through the motions at practice, or chasing a goal that really belongs to you or their coach, instead of themselves. Strong clarity sounds like a specific answer, such as, "I want to make varsity next year, and I need a quicker first step to do it."

Low confidence looks like hiding from the ball, playing not to lose, or saying "I'm just not good at this" after one bad

game. Strong confidence looks like an athlete who wants the ball with the game on the line, and who can name the work they've done to earn it. It's someone who's ready to fight, battle, and win until the final whistle.

Low composure looks like one mistake turning into three, a thrown helmet, tears in the dugout, or a car ride home in total silence. Strong composure looks like a quick reset after an error, and an athlete who can study, talk about, and learn from a tough game the next day without falling apart or ignoring it completely.

Jot down what you notice this week. The point is to learn where to start, and that's the same thing we do in a first session.

"Find the biggest bottleneck, and strengthen it until it isn't one anymore."

Training Notes for Coaches

Coaches, run the 1 to 10 check on the 3 Cs with your team at the start of the season and again at midseason. It takes five minutes, and it shows you which C your team needs most. Excel sheets work great, but a doc or plain paper works just as well.

Your Next Step

Ask your athlete to rate themselves from 1 to 10 on each C. How clear are they on their goal? How confident do they feel going into games? How well do they keep their cool when things go wrong? Write the three numbers down and

keep them. You'll use them again in Chapter 9, and you just did your first rep of tracking.

Go Deeper: *Watch this chapter's free Huddle video and grab the Guided Reps training sheet at topathletehabits.com/ch4.*

A Quick Favor

You're about a third of the way up the mountain of finishing this book now, and back in Chapter 1, I asked you to help spread the word. The easiest way to do that is a quick review.

In Chapter 2, you saw how fast youth sports are growing, with more kids, more money, and more pressure than ever. In Chapter 3, you saw that mental training is its own lane, separate from counseling, and most families don't even know that lane exists. Now you know the 3 Cs. The families who need this most haven't heard of it yet, and the fastest way to reach them is you.

If this book is helping your family, even a little, leave a quick review at topathletehabits.com/review. Whether you got it on Amazon or straight from us, that link takes you to the right spot. It takes two minutes, and it helps the next parent, family, and program find us.

If you want to tell a quick story, that's even better. Follow this simple structure so other parents can see how much your student-athlete grew.

Before: Where was your athlete before they started training their mind?

The rep: Which mental exercise from this book did you try?

After: What changed in their game, their confidence, or your car rides home?

Then take it one step further and pass this book to someone who needs it. You never know which student-athlete is one conversation away from a breakthrough.

Chapter 5:

Clarity

> ***"He who has a why to live can bear almost any how."***
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche

In our first session with an athlete, one of the first questions we ask is simple. What do you actually want to do? Then I ask the athlete to think crazy big. If there were no limits at all, what would you go after? What do you want to make happen?

So often, nobody has ever asked them that. Coaches ask about the next game, and parents ask about homework. Almost nobody helps a student-athlete name the summit that their performance pulse keeps beating toward, the one that keeps inspiring their hard work. That's where clarity starts, and everything else gets built on it.

Mountains and Stepping Stones

The mountain goal is that big vision. It can feel a little scary, but the top always looks so miraculous from the bottom. When athletes get there, it's usually everything they imagined.

The problem is that staring at the summit can overwhelm anybody. So we plan the climb one step at a time, and those are the stepping stone goals. Each stepping stone answers one question. What are we doing next to get up there?

Your athlete needs both. When it gets hard, and it will, the mountain goal reminds them why they're climbing. The next stepping stone tells them what to do right now, and action alleviates anxiety.

Goal setting works in sports. A meta-analysis of sport goal-setting research found that setting goals improved performance, and the biggest gains came from pairing long-term goals with short-term goals.[28] That's the mountain and the stepping stones, backed by classic scientific literature.

Imagine your son or daughter as a little kid at the playground. They didn't stare at the top of the slide and freeze. They hopped from one ledge to the next until they were at the top. That's mountain and stepping stone goals, and it works at age 9 and at 19.

Every mountain looks different. Some of our athletes want their sport to pay for college. Some want to provide for their family someday, and that path might not even run through college sports. Some just want this season to be the best one they've ever had. We carve out that goal first. Then we look at where they need more confidence and where they need to hold their composure to get there. No mountain is too big or too small, as long as it belongs to your student-athlete.

Peaks and Valleys

I love nature because it has its ups and downs, literally. Compress a mountain range into a two-dimensional shape and its outline looks like the line on a heart monitor. The peaks and valleys of the climb are the beats of the performance pulse.

The first few steps feel amazing. Your student-athlete wins a few games, makes a big play, and feels on top of the world. Then something happens, like a loss, an injury, or getting benched. Suddenly it feels like the world is over.

On a real climb, the first peak is usually easy to see. Then you reach it and notice a higher peak hiding behind it that you never saw from the bottom. Between the two sits a deep valley. You climbed all that way just to find more challenges, and now you have to go down before you can go up.

That's why we plan for it, and why I like to ask athletes, "What part of your story are you in right now?" We can't see every valley ahead of time, but we can know they're coming and decide how we'll handle them before we get there.

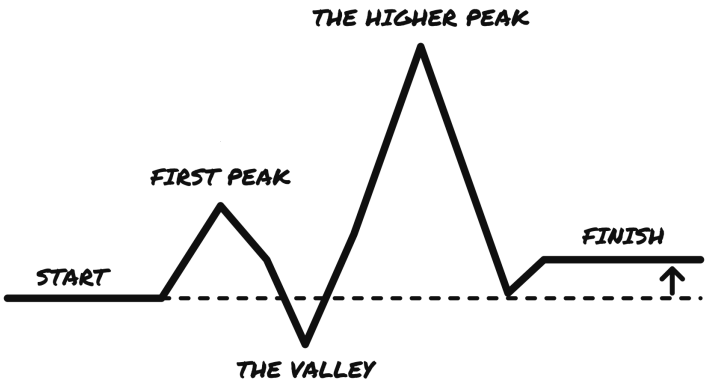

Fig 5.1 Sometimes you go down before you go higher.

One of our baseball players was playing up a level, filling in for a college commit who got hurt the year before. Then that player came back healthy, and our athlete lost the spot.

Picture sitting in the dugout, watching someone else jog out to the position you thought was yours. He had to handle the pressure, support a teammate, and keep his own game sharp, all at the same time. We planned for that valley together. He kept training and earned his role back as positions changed, which they so often do. That's why we train continuously. He kept climbing from there.

We've also worked with a few sophomore quarterbacks. The game was speeding up on them, and some went on to have breakout seasons, setting them up for fantastic success their junior and senior years. However, another one barely saw the field that year, and the worst part was, we started training because his family saw his starting spot slip away, and it would have been easy for him to check out.

Instead, we kept training like his time was coming. Every practice rep and every film session stacked more confidence for the next season. The truth was, during that summer of training, he didn't fully want the starting spot yet, or at least not the pressure, because he didn't know the playbook or how to handle the varsity level.

See It Before It Happens

Watch a great boxer or MMA fighter. They see the punch or the takedown coming before it lands. They slip it and counter with their own. They got ahead of it instead of scrambling after it. That's the difference between reacting and responding. Reacting is automatic, like a reflex or an emotion grabbing the wheel when something surprises you. Responding is a choice, a calm and planned move that

fits the bigger game plan. Clarity is what turns reactions into responses.

Clarity lets your student-athlete do the same thing. Remember the ghost from earlier, the invisible mental game? When your athlete doesn't know what's coming, it haunts them. It breathes down their neck like fog rolling in, engulfing them, and they have no idea what to do.

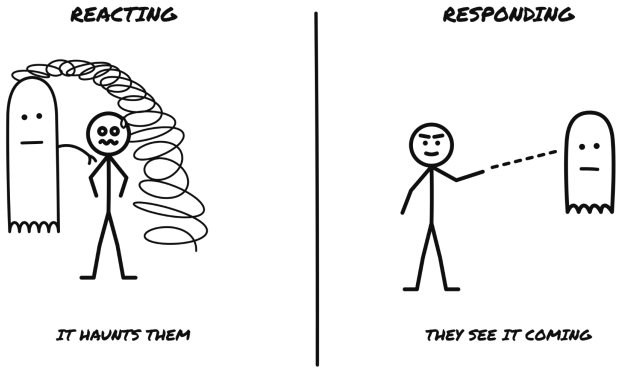

Fig 5.2 Without clarity they react. With clarity they respond.

With clarity, they can almost see the future. It's like a defender reading the play, beating the receiver to the spot, and coming away with the interception or the steal. They saw it before it happened.

Or think of a family friend of mine, Preston LaGrange, who trained six years for the UFC and recently made his vision a reality, signing a contract on short notice through Dana White's Contender Series. He saw it long before anyone else did. He even talked about making it to the UFC on my podcast, well before it happened, and then he made it.

This is called visualization, which I love to say is seeing the vision in one's mind like a movie. Your athlete pictures the game, the tough moments, and how they'll handle each one. When they see it first, they play more confidently and more composed, which is why clarity is the base for the other two Cs.

Visualization is more than some internet fad. A meta-analysis of 35 studies found that mentally rehearsing a skill improved real performance, and a follow-up review more than 20 years later found the effect still held.[12,50] Mental reps are real reps, and they work best alongside physical practice.

The best athletes in the world already do this. Sport psychologist Shane Murphy worked with U.S. Olympic athletes and found that about 90% of them used mental rehearsal, and 97% of those athletes agreed it improved performance.[25] Picture a room of 10 Olympians. Nine of them are seeing it before it happens, and almost every one of those nine will tell you it works.

Remember the super tall basketball player from Chapter 2, the one who was too scared to dunk? He was growing fast and could dunk in practice, but he couldn't make it happen in games. His parents told us the mental game was his weakest point, and they weren't sure how to train it. So we walked through game situations together, again and again, stacking mental exercises.

He pictured the defender, the crowd noise, the squeak of shoes on the floor, and the moment he took off. We added breathing to slow the game down, so what he did in practice could show up when it counted. Then it clicked,

and he started slamming it home in games. Even better, he became the leader his team needed.

Sports have grown up faster than our kids, so this matters more now than ever. As the parent, the coach, or the student-athlete, you can prepare for those moments before they arrive.

One Next Step

Once your athlete has the vision, and maybe a few chapters of this book in their head, it may start to feel like a lot. “Wow, we have so much to do,” one may say. That feeling is normal.

So treat the next step like it’s the only one that matters, instead of staring at the whole mountain. One step is something your athlete can get done today. Then comes another stepping stone, and another, and before they know it they’re across the river in their path without getting their feet wet. Without a plan, they would have been soaked on the first step.

In our training, clarity comes first. Then we build confidence and dial in composure, because that’s where athletes feel the difference fastest. Once those are strong, we come back to clarity and dig deeper into their why.

In high school, my mountain goal was to dunk. Everyone told me, “Dude, you’re 5’11”, you’re a skinny white kid who runs cross country, you’re not going to dunk.” That was my mountain, and every day was a stepping stone. You already know how that story ended.

Now I’m here, writing and publishing a book to bring real value to families like yours and to grow our community at

TAH. Talk about another mountain goal. We're just getting started.

Whose Mountain Is It?

One of the first questions I ask parents is simple. Whose goal is this? Sometimes the mountain an athlete names belongs to someone else, like a parent who played, a coach who needs a starter, or a friend who just committed to a college.

For instance, picture two athletes running the same sprints at 6 a.m. One is there because their parents want a scholarship. The other is there because they want to see how fast they can get, and get themselves a scholarship. They have the same field, the same coach, and the same sprints.

Watch them in February, when the season is long and the mornings are dark. The second athlete is still showing up with energy, or at least determination, and the first one is looking for reasons to skip. I coached and was around the youth speed and agility industry long enough to see both of those kids more times than I can count.

Research on motivation finds that people who chase goals they truly care about stick with them longer and enjoy the work more than people chasing goals to please someone else.[11] Your athlete will climb a lot harder up a mountain they picked. That's why we make sure in our training we have them help create the mental exercises, and we label their goals.

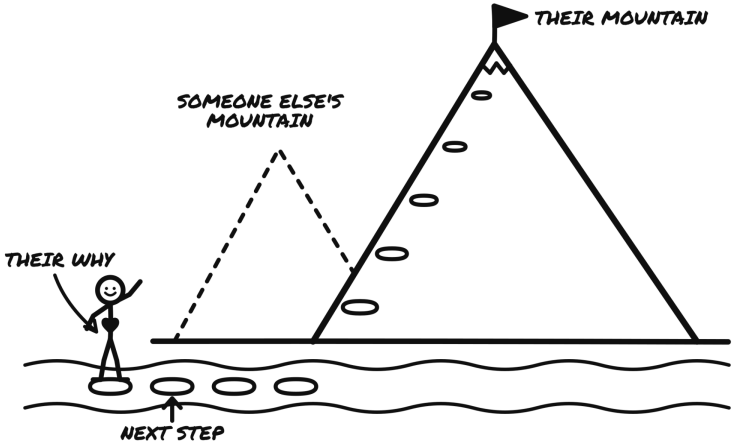

Fig 5.3 Their mountain, their why, one stepping stone at a time.

Now, this doesn't mean you stay quiet. You know your student-athlete, and your input matters. Ask questions that help them find their own why, like "What would it feel like to reach that?" or "Why does that matter to you?" Then let them do most of the talking.

Specific Beats "Do Your Best"

"Just go out there and do your best." Every athlete has heard it, and I've probably said it a hundred times in the past myself. It's kind, and it comes from a good place. The problem is that your athlete has no idea what their best looks like on a Tuesday in October, or a Monday in March.

Specific, challenging goals lead to better performance than vague "do your best" goals, and that finding has held up across hundreds of studies in sports, school, and work.[32]

Imagine telling a basketball player to "shoot better," and then imagine telling them to "hit 80 out of 100 free throws in practice today, with a full routine on every shot." The second one gives them a target and a way to know if they hit it.

A good stepping stone goal is something your athlete controls, something they can measure, and something with a finish line. "Win the conference" is a great mountain, but your athlete can't fully control it. "Run my reset after every missed shot this weekend" is a stepping stone they own.

One way I teach this is POP. In Utah, where Angie was recruited to coach Division I soccer, soda pop is a big deal, and everyone has a favorite. Here, POP stands for process, outcome, and performance goals.

- Process goals are what your athlete does, like running their reset every time.
- Outcome goals are the results, like winning the conference.
- Performance goals measure your athlete against themselves, like raising their free throw percentage.

Set all three, or you're leaving wins to chance.

What Clarity Looks Like in a Session

When a new athlete starts with us, clarity is where we begin, and we walk through it in five steps.

First, we name the mountain. We ask for the crazy big goal, and we put it in their words.

Second, we find the why, because we always look for both the what and the why. We dig until we hit something real. Sometimes it's a scholarship. Sometimes it's making a

grandparent proud. Sometimes it's proving a coach wrong, or those haters and bullies, and that's okay too, as long as it fuels them. I'm not against that "dark side" of the Mamba Mentality. Mine was proving every kid who laughed at me for wanting to dunk wrong, being able to dunk whenever I pleased, and making it to state in high jump. Now, it's helping student-athletes and their supporters with trackable mental training, and the goal is millions.

Third, we map the stepping stones. We work backward from the summit to this week. What has to be true by the end of the season, by next month, and by Friday, to reach that mountain goal?

Fourth, we plan for the valleys. We ask, "What usually knocks you off track?" Then we decide ahead of time what they'll do when it happens, whether it's a bad game, a benching, an injury, or a new coach. It's not a matter of if it happens, but when. When we've talked about it in advance, it becomes a valley they expected instead of a cliff they fell off.

Last, we see it. We walk through the upcoming week in their mind, including the practice, the game, the tough moment, and the response. We brainstorm, see, and walk through the options. By the time they get there, they've already been there once, so they have a much better understanding of how to handle it.

Listening for Clarity at Home

You can check your athlete's clarity in the car in under a minute. Ask, "What are you working on right now?" An athlete with clarity has a quick answer, like "my left hand"

or “staying calm on free throws.” An athlete without it shrugs and goes back to their phone.

If you get a shrug, skip the lecture. Ask one more question, like “If you could get better at one thing by next month, what would it be?” You just helped them set a stepping stone, and they did it themselves.

The Pink Elephant Guy

For a while, a whole basketball club in Iowa knew me as the Pink Elephant Guy. It was winter, so the high school players were busy with their school teams, but the club still had kids from first and second grade all the way up to eighth grade. We worked with every team in the program, plus their parents and coaches.

At the start of one practice, I told the kids, “Don’t, don’t, don’t, don’t think about… a pink elephant.” And boom, every single one of them pictured a pink elephant. Of course, a few swore they pictured a blue or purple elephant instead. How special are they, right? Then we took it to basketball. “Don’t turn it over.” “Don’t miss this shot.” “Don’t throw a bad pass.” Their brains went straight to the exact thing they were trying to avoid.

That’s a clarity mental exercise. Your student-athlete’s brain locks onto whatever picture you give it, so give it the picture of what you want to happen. Instead of “Don’t turn it over,” try “Strong hands, eyes up.” You’ll see the research behind this in Chapter 10.

From that point on, I was the Pink Elephant Guy. Kids asked their coaches, “When’s the Pink Elephant Guy coming back?” When we returned the next session and season, that’s how they greeted me. Parents knew me as

Gabe from TAH, since we ran parent and coach sessions, but the pink elephant is what stuck. People don't remember words nearly as well as they remember pictures, feelings, and stories. That's why so much of our training runs on images, actions, and much more than just "talking," like a goldfish memory for mistakes, a mountain to climb, or a heartbeat to keep going.

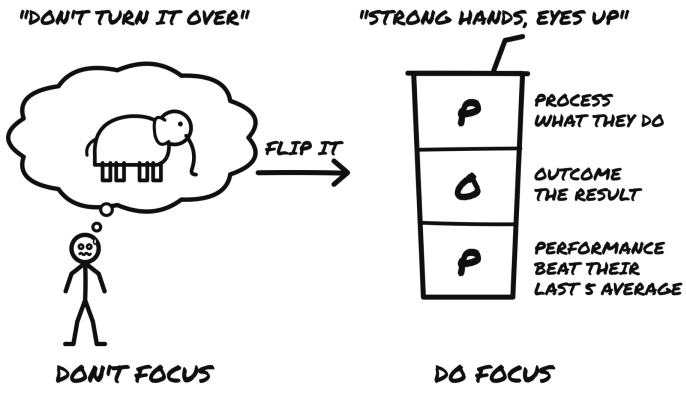

Fig 5.4 "Don't" paints the pink elephant. POP paints what to do.

Training Notes for Coaches

Coaches, ask every athlete for their mountain goal and their next stepping stone at the start of the season, and write both down. Put it in an Excel sheet, doc, or paper on the locker room wall with personal bests. When an athlete hits a valley midseason, bring them back to their own words.



Your Next Step

Ask your student-athlete, “If there were no limits, what’s your crazy big goal?” Write it at the top of a sheet of paper. Have them put it in their room, or you put it on the fridge. Show it off for all to see. That’s the mountain goal. Then ask, “What’s one stepping stone you can take this week?” Write it at the bottom. Then ask yourself a real question. Are you helping them climb, or holding them back without meaning to?

Go Deeper: *Watch this chapter’s free Huddle video and grab the Guided Reps training sheet at topathletehabits.com/ch5.*

Chapter 6:

Confidence

> ***"Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do."***
>
> John Wooden

Picture two athletes walking to the free throw line with the game tied. One bounces the ball, breathes, and lets it fly like it's practice. The other looks at the rim, then the crowd, then the bench, and you can see the doubt in their shoulders. They have the same height, the same skills, and the same number of practice shots. The difference is confidence, and it is built.

Confidence Is Built, Not Born

We look at the kid who seems born confident and think they got lucky. I'm here to tell you, they didn't get lucky. Somewhere along the way, they were fed confidence like it was baked into the bread, cereal, and milk they consumed every day. Confidence was the main ingredient at every meal, so by the time we saw them play, it looked like they were born with it.

So I want you to think of confidence as bred, as built, not born. The sooner your athlete gets fed confidence, the stronger it grows and the more they perform because of it, and with it.

That puts some of this on you, the parent, reading this. If you're the athlete reading over your parent's shoulder, it's on you too, because you can feed your own confidence.

Confidence can't be left to hope. It needs routines, like a pre-game routine, a pre-shot routine, or the same warm-up song in the car. With a routine, your athlete doesn't have to wait for confidence to show up. They know how to bring it.

When the routine is built, your athlete steps up and their body knows what to do, because their mind has done it a hundred times. It's a structured funnel, like an hourglass, guiding them into the performance. The moment they start thinking about mechanics in the middle of a golf swing, confidence leaks out. The routine keeps them out of their own way.

Sometimes a routine changes things rapidly. We met with one softball player a single time. She was overthinking every at-bat, so we built her a simple routine at the plate that she could run before every pitch. That one session was all it took to get her started. Even though a routine is often a composure mental exercise, it's all she needed to strengthen her confidence. She told us the rest of her season was the most fun she'd had playing, ever.

Whether it's the night before, hours before the game, or during the performance, routines work. A meta-analysis covering about 800 athletes across 15 sports found that athletes who learned a pre-performance routine performed better than athletes who didn't. It held up in lab tests and in real competition, with pressure and without it, at every age and skill level they looked at.[45] Routines that funnel into the performance, and carry through it, are game changers.

One routine we teach golfers is a pyramid that has three steps, called Calculate, Create, and Crush. Calculate is picking the plan, like the club, the wind, and the target. Create is seeing and feeling the shot before it happens, using a mental exercise called VTO that we'll get to in a moment. Crush means full commitment to the shot, with one instinct, one spot, and one word, and then letting it fly. All the thinking happens before the swing, so the swing itself can be free.

Proof Beats Pep Talks

Before every race, my cross country coach, Coach Schwarz, told us a funny story. By senior year they were classics. We knew exactly how each one ended, and we still wanted to hear them. Was that a pep talk, or was it a way to break the tension before the gun went off?

Pep talks alone don't do much. What builds confidence is proof, which means the reps your athlete has stacked up, the times they've already done the thing, and the evidence that they can do it again. Talking through past wins and what they prove is where real confidence comes from.

We worked with a sophomore who got moved up to varsity basketball. Basketball wasn't even her main sport, but she earned a key role as the sixth player off the bench, the spark a team counts on when the game needs a lift. If you know basketball, you know how big that role is, and the NBA even gives out a Sixth Man of the Year award for it. She had been through counseling before, and it helped in its own lane, but what we built together was different.

She was getting down on herself after every mistake, and the negativity kept snowballing. Instead of another speech,

we stacked proof, rep after rep, until she could see it too. We built a new vision for her, created an alter ego that fit her performance style, made her pre-performance routines, and stacked the mental reps with the physical ones. Her confidence started to climb, and she stepped into that sixth player role ready to make an impact.

In academia, a meta-analysis of 45 studies found that an athlete's belief in their own ability, what researchers call self-efficacy, is consistently tied to how well they perform.[38] Psychologist Albert Bandura found that the strongest source of that belief is mastery, meaning the times you've already done it.[5] That's proof beating pep talks, in research form.

VTO: Vision It, Touch It, Own It

Confidence is trust in yourself over a feeling. Feelings come and go with every made and missed shot, but trust gets built, and it comes from three places. The first is performance accomplishments, the past proof of what your student-athlete has already done. The second is skill execution, doing the skill well in practice and in games. The third is preparation, the stacked reps of work behind them.

Here's one mental exercise we use to stack proof, called VTO.

Vision It ties to performance accomplishments. Your student-athlete closes their eyes and plays a past success like a movie, or plays a future one exactly the way they want it to go.

Touch It ties to skill execution. They feel the skill done well, with the grip of the ball, the sound of the gym, the burn in their legs, and every other sense they can bring in.

Own It ties to preparation. They remind themselves of every rep they've stacked to get here, the hundreds of shots, the early mornings, and the extra sets. They earned this moment.

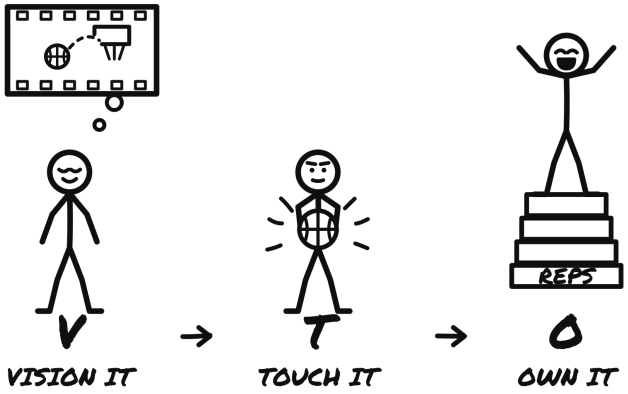

Fig 6.1 VTO; See it, feel it, own it.

Picture your athlete doing VTO for 30 seconds in the car before a game. Heck, even 10 seconds. They walk in with proof instead of hope.

The VTO exercise is a super simple way to build a routine on top of what they already do for their performance. Write it on tape on their wrist, on their shoes, or on their play card. The options are endless.

I love to tell this story with the movie Cars. Disney has a way of telling stories, and integrating lessons in them. First off, if I tell you to picture the opening scene of the movie Cars, can you?

That vision in your head is like the V of VTO, painting the picture like a movie.

Now, look at what's actually happening in that scene. Lightning McQueen sits alone before the race, eyes closed, talking himself through it. He tells himself to focus, reminds himself that he's fast, gets distracted for a second wondering if he should have eaten breakfast, and then snaps right back with "I am speed." If you don't remember this scene, go check it out immediately.

I get shivers rewatching it as I write this. That is because he is doing the VTO exercise. The scene flashes to races. But he's not actually racing at that moment. He's seeing it like a movie, getting the feel of the track, and owning his skill and ability. Then he comes out cool, confident, and composed.

Later, we see the exact opposite happen. He can't focus, and he can't picture the track or himself on it. That is often what is happening to your student-athlete.

I like to tell athletes that confidence is like a coat. It hangs by the door, and they grab it on the way out before every practice and every game. Some days they forget it at home. Some days a bad game knocks it right off their shoulders and onto the floor.

When that happens, they don't have to sit and wait for it to show up again, or to magically be placed back on their shoulders. They retrace their steps, the same way you'd look for a lost coat, and walk back through their proof until they find it. If it's lost, find it. If it's dropped, pick it back up.

Take the Leap

Your athlete can practice, train, and do every rep, and the nerves will still show up the first time. No amount of preparation makes those butterflies disappear completely. At some point, we have to leap. Fly with the butterflies.

Dan Sullivan of Strategic Coach teaches a cycle he calls the 4 Cs. Commitment comes first, then courage, then capability, and finally confidence. Notice where courage sits. Courage is the leap across the chasm between committing and becoming capable, and confidence is waiting on the other side. We aren't capable, let alone actually confident, until we have the courage to make the jump.

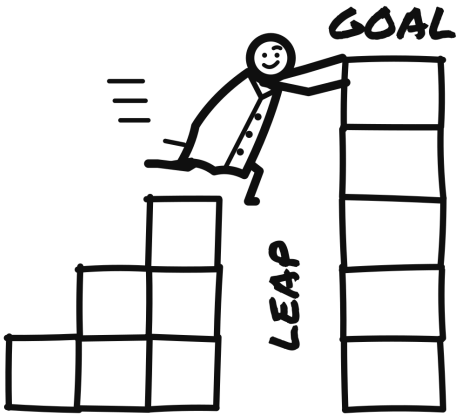

Fig 6.2 Leap first, and the proof meets them on the other side.

Think back to the stories at the start of this book. Keegan leaped into a prep school year when the offers weren't there. Angie leaped across the country to a school she had

never toured. I leaped back into senior track season when Coach Schwarz pulled me back in. None of us felt totally ready or fully confident, but we leaped anyway, and the confidence came with the proof.

Confident athletes walk into new chances with one of my favorite lines in mind. You can't have it if you don't ask for it, and you can't have it if you don't go for it.

The first game will bring butterflies. We don't try to kill them. We're thankful they aren't moths. We teach your athlete to line them up so they all fly in the same direction, and that's where confidence hands off to composure.

Now your athlete is ready to hike. They can see the summit, they've planned for the journey, and they believe they can get there.

Signs Confidence Is Leaking

Confidence rarely disappears all at once. It leaks out a little at a time, and the signs show up long before the stat sheet changes.

Watch the body language first. Their shoulders start to sag. After a mistake, their eyes go to the ground, to the bench, or to you in the stands. The head shakes down and stays there. Your student-athlete starts playing not to lose instead of playing to win. The shooter passes up open shots. The pitcher aims the ball instead of throwing it. The defender backs off.

Then listen to the words. "I'm just not a good hitter." "Coach doesn't trust me." "I always choke in big games." Those words are the sound of the coat sliding off their shoulders.

Confidence and performance are tied together. A meta-analysis of 48 studies found that self-confidence had a clear positive link to how well athletes performed.[55] When confidence slips, performance usually follows close behind.

What You Say Matters

Parents feed their student-athletes confidence every day, often without noticing. The words you use after a game can build proof or chip away at it.

The type of praise matters. In a well-known set of studies, kids who were praised for their effort kept choosing harder problems and enjoyed them more. Kids who were praised for being smart were more likely to give up when the work got hard.[39] That's one reason why, when I hear anyone say, "You're smart," I like to name the actions that led to it.

Bring that into the car ride. "You're so talented" feels nice, but it gives your athlete nothing to stand on when they struggle. "I saw you sprint back on defense every single time, even when you were tired" is proof. Your athlete can take that into the next game and know it's true, because they did it.

A good rule is to praise what your athlete controls, like effort, attitude, preparation, how they responded to a mistake, and how they treated teammates. I tell athletes, coaches, and programs that they already know this, because they've been playing it.

Remember the classic video game slogan, "EA Sports, it's in the game"? I like to say EA stands for effort and attitude. Those are reps they can repeat. Talent and results come and go, and I've watched plenty of talented kids get passed by kids who just kept showing up.

Building Confidence in a Session

When an athlete comes to us with low confidence, we skip the hype and start with evidence. I'm a science guy, so I like stats, facts, and receipts.

First, we build the proof list. We ask them to name times they did something hard, in games, in practice, and even outside of sports. Most athletes start with two or three. By the end of the session, they usually have ten, because they forgot how much proof they already had.

We check on what they did well, like their highlight moment and what they loved. We analyze what could have been better, because everyone thinks about that to some degree, and some athletes more than others. Then we plan out what we're going to do next about it.

We call this our postgame Oreo exercise. What do you do with an Oreo? If you have one in your hand, you eat it. I've never met anyone who can resist the temptation. Those three questions match an Oreo perfectly.



Fig 6.3 Learn from the game, then eat it and move on.

- Top cookie is what we did well.
- Cream, the best part, is what we could do better.
- Bottom cookie is what we're going to do next.
- Finally, we eat it. After analyzing and learning postgame, we bring that confidence into the next practice, or the next game if it's a tournament weekend.

For another mental exercise, we build a preset, the routine they run before the moment. It might be a breath, a cue word, and a quick VTO, among many other examples. Every time they run it, they're telling their body, "We've been here before."

I always ask athletes, "What are you doing at the end that you could be doing at the start?" Start the game mentally in the warm-up, or even when you suit up, so the jitters are gone and handled before the first whistle.

Then we stack new proof on purpose. We pick a small challenge for the week, something they can win, and we track it. Small wins pile up like plates on the squat rack. After a few weeks, the athlete who said "I always choke" has a page of evidence that says otherwise.

Go back to the free throw from the start of this chapter, one month later. Your student-athlete steps to the line, runs their preset, and remembers the 40 free throws they hit in practice that week with the same full routine. The crowd is just as loud, but the doubt talking inside their head is a lot quieter.

Confidence Off the Field

The proof list doesn't care where the proof came from. An athlete who studied hard and aced a chemistry test has proof they can prepare and perform under pressure. A kid who gave a class presentation with shaking hands has proof they can be brave and complete an objective while nervous. Confidence built in one part of life carries into the others, and that's the "for life" part of everything we do at TAH.

Funneling Confidence Into the Game

One of my favorite turnarounds was a basketball player heading into his freshman year. He was starting to take the game seriously and trying out for some of the big travel teams in the area. Both of his parents were college athletes, so the talent was there. But for some reason, he just couldn't play the way he practiced, which is one of the most common things I hear.

We built it piece by piece over many sessions. First came his goals, so he knew what he was climbing toward. Then we built in-game resets. Then we worked on the part most athletes skip, funneling confidence into the game.

Think about the day of a big game. The nerves start building in the morning, then in the car, then in warm-ups. If your athlete walks onto the court with those nerves still spinning and makes an early mistake, one mistake turns into two, and it snowballs. So we built a pregame routine that funneled all that energy into confidence, starting hours before tip-off and narrowing down to the first possession, like water running through a funnel.

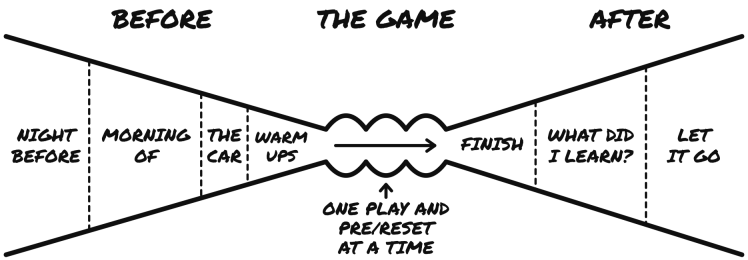

Fig 6.4 Funnel the nerves into one play at a time.

In fact, that funnel often starts the night before or the morning of. It may start by putting the phone down to get a good night's sleep, or with brushing their teeth and eating breakfast in the morning. We'll have a check-in at first period, then at lunch, storing that energy they have for game time, and before we know it, they are fully charged and excited, ready to go for the game.

For our student-athlete above, it clicked, and he was playing a totally different game. He wasn't dropping 30 points a night or weekend, and he didn't need to. He was filling up the stat sheet, playing to his strengths, working on his weaknesses, and trusting his ability the whole way. We have a proprietary system to track mental strength scores from 1 to 10 with our athletes. His confidence started around a 6, and by the end, it was sitting at 9s and 10s.

Training Notes for Coaches

Coaches, think about what you say before games. Like Coach Schwarz's stories, the best pregame talks ease the tension and remind athletes of their proof. Point to specific reps they've put in, instead of only telling them to believe in themselves.



Your Next Step

Tonight, help your athlete build a proof list. Ask them to name three times they did something hard in their sport, and write them where they'll see them before games. Then try VTO together with one of those moments, and let them feel the proof. If the teen divide is strong in your house right now, tell them to do it on their own, because it's what the pros do. If they still don't listen, hand them this chapter and say Gabe said to do it.

Go Deeper: *Watch this chapter's free Huddle video and grab the Guided Reps training sheet at topathletehabits.com/ch6.*

Chapter 7:

Composure

"Pressure is a privilege."

Billie Jean King

Everybody wishes for the same thing. They want to do one mental training session, get full control over the game and their thoughts, and then magically win every time. Whoa, Nellie, that's a bucking bronco, and there's a lot more to it than meets the eye.

When You Can't Control the Outcome

Composure isn't controlling everything, because nobody can control the outcome. Yet so many athletes and families live and die by it.

John Wooden, the legendary UCLA basketball coach, didn't judge his teams by the scoreboard. He defined success as the peace of mind that comes from knowing you did your best.[54] He knew he couldn't control the final score, only everything leading up to it. He was so comfortable going into games that he could take naps.

That's where composure starts. When your student-athlete can't control the outcome, they fall back on what they can control, which is themselves. The whole goal is to take full control of yourself. Their thoughts drive their actions and their instincts. If they're thinking timid, scared, and

nervous, that's exactly how they'll play. In the end, attitudes drive actions.

It sounds simple, but look at how many athletes struggle with it at every level. Simone Biles, maybe the greatest gymnast of all time, pulled out of the team final at the Tokyo Olympics to protect her mental health and her safety. She came back days later and won a bronze medal on the balance beam.[8] At the next Olympics in Paris, she proved why she's the greatest of all time. Composure needs to be trained at every age, from a 9-year-old to an Olympian.

Steady When Nobody Has Answers

Remember my Pikes Peak climb? On a climb like that, you hope nothing goes wrong. Well, I wish that were the case. I got hit with altitude sickness on the way up. Could I have brought better medicine? Sure, but I still couldn't control the actual altitude and my physiological response to it. The only option was to get to the top, talk to the doctors, and get back down.

On the way down, by the end of the 28-mile hike, everyone's feet were killing them, and mine were fine because I train in flat shoes, a more barefoot style that some say is best for your feet, but that's a subject for an entirely different book. Things you can't plan for will happen, on the mountain and in the game.

When things go wrong, your student-athlete needs something steady to come back to, and that's their performance pulse. The performance pulse has many different meanings depending on the context of its use. But in this case, they feel their heartbeat, the one thing still

beating steady, and it pulls them back to what they can control.

Some of my athletes call this exercise The Heartbeat. They feel their pulse, get calm and steady, and then go back out and play the game they love without all that extra pressure sitting on their shoulders.

Remember the sixth-grade golfer from Chapter 2, the great kid who fell apart after a couple of bad shots? The Heartbeat is built for moments like that. One pulse check between shots gives a young athlete something steady to hold onto while the round is still going.

Nobody has every answer, especially your student-athlete. Ask how it's going and you'll usually hear, "It's pretty good," or, "Smooth sailing," or my favorite, "fine." That's often what they say when they don't know the answer. Underneath, there's a root cause, and that's where composure is falling apart.

Think of a tree. Resilient roots hold the whole thing up. Clarity and confidence are the roots, and composure keeps them strong so the tree can grow tall and your athlete can play their best. Even in the most brutal winter, those roots keep growing underneath the soil, rooting themselves in, grabbing more nutrients and energy, waiting for the tree to blossom in the spring.

Diamonds or Dust

Pressure is coming either way. Some athletes pile it on themselves, and sometimes families add more without meaning to. Pressure can turn your athlete into a diamond, or it can crush them into dust.

Billie Jean King famously said that pressure is a privilege.[27] It means your athlete is in a moment that matters. That privilege is what makes the diamond, if they know how to handle it.

I call this the present. Pressure is a privilege, and it's a present for your student-athlete. The best time to open that present is the present moment, so appreciate the pressure and understand that not everyone gets it. The teammate on the bench would love to be out there in their place, at least until they feel that pressure. Then it comes down to how much they've trained for the present moment and the privilege of pressure.

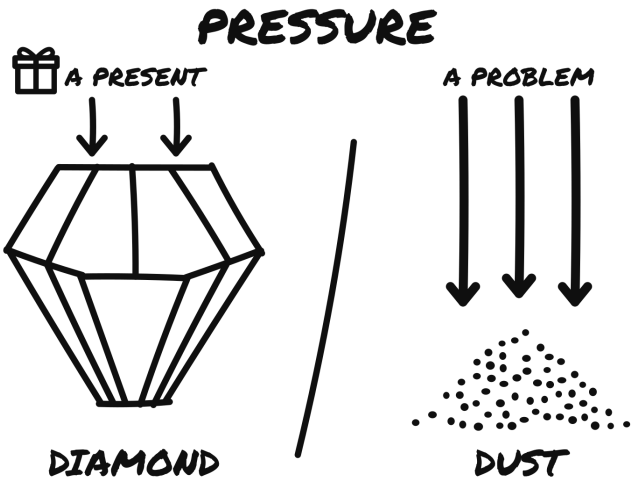

Fig 7.1 Pressure makes diamonds or dust. Training decides which.

How your student-athlete sees pressure changes how they perform. A systematic review found that athletes who see a big moment as a challenge they're ready for tend to

perform better than athletes who see it as a threat.[22] It's the same moment and the same pressure, with a different result. It's perceived on separate sides of the fence. One is ready to attack pressure, while the other is ready to run away.

Think about your athlete at the plate with the bases loaded, or on the mat with the team totals tied. That pressure can become the moment they remember forever. The difference is whether they've trained for it. And there are levels to pressure. You don't train for the game winner before you've learned to handle the opening whistle.

This goes for good problems too. The athlete who just made varsity, got a first college letter, or started getting noticed feels a whole new kind of pressure. Composure helps them handle success as well as struggle. It doesn't even have to be that high of a level. It can be as simple as competing for the JV spot they want. Everything in this book, including the pressure, is relative.

Remember the freshman volleyball player from Chapter 2? She made varsity as a freshman, and her coach was already giving her great mental training ideas, so she had a head start. Otherwise, she would surely be fresh meat.

Still, her serve felt fast, like the whole gym was rushing her. On game days, she could feel the pressure building from the moment she walked into school. We built on what her coach had started. We slowed her serve down with a routine and planned how she would charge up through the day leading into the game. She told us she felt so much more free on the court, and her game stats and our mental training stats both showed it.

The Reset Between Plays

Every sport has gaps between plays. Basketball moves really fast. In soccer, if the ball isn't near you, you're potentially walking for a brief moment while the clock and play continue. Golf and baseball have plenty of time between swings and pitches, even with baseball's new pitch clock. In cross country, it's just you, your thoughts, your aching legs, your breathing, and your heartbeat getting louder.

The resets in those gaps make the biggest difference. Nine times out of ten, building a reset is what we do in the first session with a new athlete. There are lots of ways to reset, and here are three to start with.

It's important to note that saying or talking about the "next play" is a double-edged sword. It helps your athlete move on and plan the right move. Push it too far, and it pulls them into what-ifs and future thinking, and they miss the only play that matters, the one they're in right now. On top of that, saying "next play" can actually keep them thinking about the last play.

Physical Reset

Your student-athlete does something with their body, like a breath, The Heartbeat from earlier in this book, a snap, a clap, tightening a shoelace, or rolling up a sleeve. The options are literally endless. Watch any game on TV and you'll spot them. When a quarterback wipes his hands on his towel, odds are that's his reset, in addition to wiping the sweat off his hand. We've built a towel reset with almost every quarterback we've worked with, because it works for everybody.

One football player we trained competed so hard that a couple of bad plays would wreck his whole game. That was all he could think about, drive after drive. His exercise was to keep his head on straight, and we meant that literally. After a bad, or good play, he squared his helmet, set his eyes level on the line of scrimmage, and took one breath before the next snap. The physical cue gave his mind a place to land, and a place to go attack.

Visual Reset

After a bad play, your athlete's brain keeps replaying it. A visual reset locks their eyes onto something new. They pick one spot, like the corner of the towel or the corner of the scoreboard, lock in, and load up for the next play.

It can even be imaginary. One of our basketball players, a Division I hopeful, pictured a gorilla hanging from the rafters above the backboard. Every time he went up, he was reaching to high-five that gorilla, and he started dunking every time.

Verbal Reset

Your athlete says one word or phrase that moves them to the next play. A golfer says a word instead of thinking about form mid-swing, so they just swing their swing. A hitter uses a cue word between pitches.

Iowa State's Milan Momcilovic led Division I men's basketball in three-point percentage during the 2025-26 season, and before his shots he used one word, jellybean. He worked with a sports psychologist to pick a single cue that blocks out thoughts about his mechanics, so he can just shoot.[30] It later became a big talking point on sports

broadcasts, but every TAH athlete and family already knew about cue words and had their own.

Studies show cue words like this work. A review of 32 sport studies found that self-talk improves performance. Short technical cues helped most with fine skills like shooting or putting, and motivational phrases helped most with strength and endurance.[23] We slowly stack all of these for our student-athletes, so try it out with yours. For a place to start, notice the usual tics they have, and turn them into a mental exercise.

The resets listed here aren't the only ones, and your athlete can build more as they get stronger. Once you learn them, though, it's TAH-Dah, magical. I'm just kidding, we don't believe in magic or luck. It's more like TAH-Duh, obviously. They just make sense.

When we put the resets together, we use a simple order called ADELE.

- Awareness comes first, which means noticing their temperature, like checking a thermometer that's starting to run hot. Even better, they become the thermostat and control their own temperature.
- Do is the physical reset.
- Exclaim is the verbal reset.
- Look is the visual reset.
- Echo means that if the bad play is still echoing in their head, they run the reset one more time.

Picture a shortstop who boots an easy ground ball in the fifth inning. She feels her face get hot and notices it. She wipes her glove across her pants, says her cue word under her breath, and locks her eyes on the bill of her cap. If the error is still ringing in her ears, she runs it again. By the

time the pitcher toes the rubber, she's ready for the next ball to hit her way.

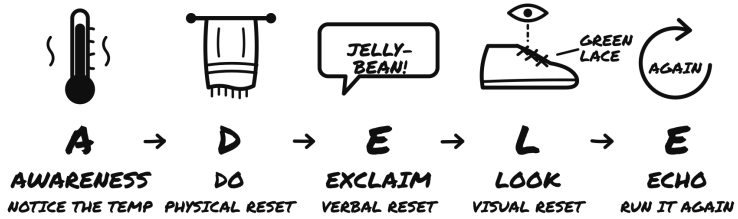

Fig 7.2 Notice it, do it, say it, see it, run it again.

A verbal reset is the routine the hitter from Chapter 2 was missing, the one who crushed it in practice and overthought every pitch in games. A cue word gives his mind one job, so his body can do the rest.

What Pressure Does to the Body

Before I trained athletes, I studied stress in a neuroscience lab at Iowa State. Yes, a lot of that research was on rodents, and yes, they taught me a ton about people. That's where I learned what pressure and stress actually do inside the body and brain.

When your athlete feels pressure, their brain sounds an alarm. Stress hormones flood the body. The heart speeds up, breathing gets fast and shallow, and muscles tighten. Vision narrows, almost like looking through a paper towel tube. That system was built to help us run from danger, and it's great for sprinting away from a bear on a Colorado trail, or a cougar here in Utah. It's a lot less helpful for sinking a three-foot putt or connecting bat to ball.

Observe a softball pitcher with runners on second and third. Her heart is pounding in her ears. The ball feels slick in her sweaty hand. Her mind is racing through everything that could go wrong. Her body is doing exactly what it was designed to do, even though it feels like a problem. Composure is learning to work with that system instead of getting run over by it.

Breathing, the Fastest Reset

Of all the resets we teach, breathing works the fastest, because it's the one part of that alarm system your athlete can control on purpose. They can't tell their heart to slow down, but they can slow their breathing, and the heart follows.

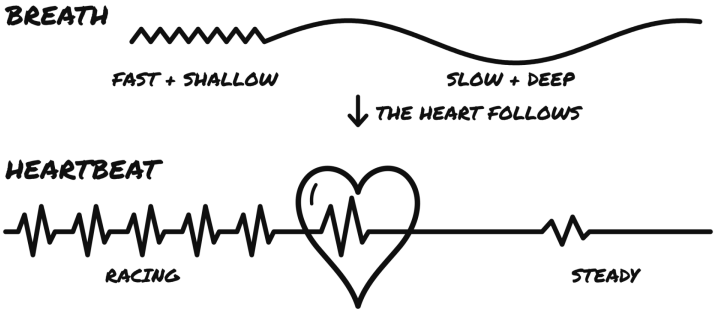

Fig 7.3 Slow the breath, and the heart follows.

Slow, controlled breathing calms the body. A systematic review found that slow breathing, under 10 breaths a minute, was linked to more relaxation, less anxiety, and steadier heart rhythms.[57] See your athlete taking a big breath in, and sighing out all the air. One breath like that starts to settle their heart rate. Three in a row give their

brain a chance to catch up and get back to playing their game.

That's why The Heartbeat works so well. Your athlete feels their pulse, slows their breath, and feels the beat come down with it. It's the performance pulse in real time.

Stillness Is a Myth

A lot of people picture composure as being totally calm, like a monk sitting on a mountaintop. That was never me, and it's not most student-athletes either. I'm personally always bouncing a leg, flicking a finger, or moving around. Most great performers don't feel the monk-like total calmness either. Athletes in the zone usually describe feeling energized, locked in, and alive.

So we don't try to erase the nerves. We try to put them to work. Some athletes play best a little fired up, and some play best a little more relaxed. Part of our job training is helping your athlete find their sweet spot and get back to it when they drift too high or too low. Think of it like a thermostat they can turn up or down.

That's the A in ADELE, being aware of their temperature. An athlete who runs too cold looks flat and slow. An athlete who runs too hot rushes, forces plays, and argues with officials. An athlete in their sweet spot plays free.

Quiet Eyes, Steady Hands

Remember the visual reset? There's research behind it. Elite athletes hold their gaze steady on a target a little longer right before they move, and researchers call this the quiet eye. I had a colleague during my first master's

program who dedicated his entire research to this specific term.

A meta-analysis found that a longer quiet eye went with better performance, and that it can in fact be trained.[31] Think about a golfer locking onto the back of the ball, or a free throw shooter fixing on the front of the rim for one extra second. That extra second of stillness in the eyes helps keep the hands steady, and turns the picture in their mind into the result on the scoreboard.

Composure Through Pain and Change

One of our baseball players was coming back from an injury while getting ready to play in college. He was pushing through pain, and he couldn't get into the game the way he used to. Every swing came with a question in the back of his mind. We looked at what he could control and set him up for the move to college ball as well as we could. For him, composure meant staying steady while his body, his team, and his future were all changing at once.

Not every valley comes from a bad game. Injuries, new teams, new coaches, and big moves test composure too, and the same resets work in all of them. It's on the off days that you flip the switch and turn the lights back on, ideally even brighter.

Your Composure Counts Just As Much

Your student-athlete watches you. If you're pacing the bleachers, yelling at officials, or sitting with a tight jaw after a mistake, they see it. Your composure becomes their weather report. I get it, because watching your own kid

compete is nerve-racking, heck, watching a favorite college or professional team is nerve-racking, and nobody ever teaches parents their own reset for those moments in the stands.

You don't have to be perfect. You just need your own reset. Take a breath when the call goes the wrong way. Keep your face steady after an error. Save the replay for later, after the cooling-off period. When your athlete looks up into the stands, let them see something steady, someone steady, that they can model and anchor to, instead of being scared to look up.

A Green Shoelace

A while back, I ran a mental training workshop at the Iowa Soccer Association's state conference. The room was almost packed, which I was and am always grateful for. We were talking about resets, which you already know a little about by now.

One coach raised his hand with an idea, saying, "Could we get a green shoelace for the whole team? Every time something goes wrong, they all look at that shoelace as a visual reset." We brainstormed it right there in the session, and by the end, that was his team's plan. Picture a whole team, each player with one green lace, all glancing down after a goal against them and looking back up ready to play.

Afterward, a few people came up to talk. One of them was a psychiatrist, and also a parent and a huge soccer fan, which is why he was there in the first place. He said what we were training at TAH lined up perfectly with research on how the brain tracks and shifts attention, and he was glad we were giving people simple ways to use it. That was a great

moment of proof. This works for one athlete, and it also works for a whole room of coaches and every team they lead.

Turning the Temperature Up or Down

Remember the thermostat from earlier in this chapter? Every athlete has a zone where they play their best, and getting there means knowing how to turn the temperature up or down on purpose. That's part of confidence too, because an athlete who knows how to find their zone walks in trusting themselves.

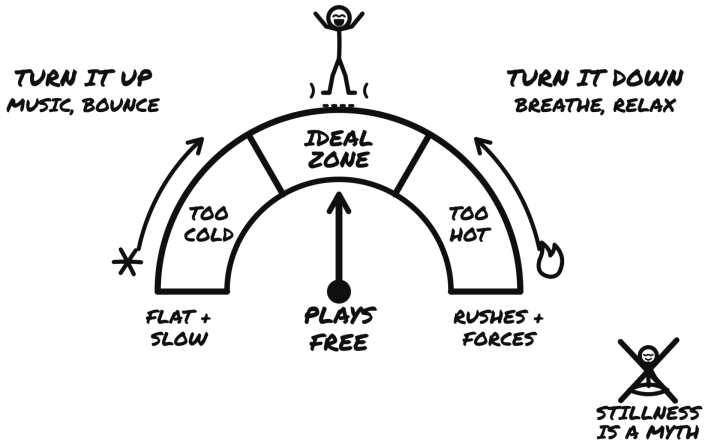

Fig 7.4 Composure means finding your ideal zone, not sitting still.

To cool down, one option is relaxation techniques. An example we like to use is progressive muscle relaxation. Your athlete tightens one muscle group at a time, like their fists, shoulders, or legs, holds it for a few seconds, and then lets it go, working from toe to head. Calming music helps too, and some athletes put on classical music or something

slow before a game. Relaxation training like this lowers anxiety. A meta-analysis of 27 studies found a clear drop in anxiety for people who practiced relaxation techniques.[35] However, performers don't always need to cool down.

To heat up, it's the opposite. Some athletes need a spark, so they turn on country, hip-hop, or rock in the car, bounce on their toes, or slap their thighs in warm-ups. These actions turn their temp up, both mentally and physically, and get them in their ideal zone of performance. There's no right answer. Whatever works for your athlete is what we train.

The military has used these same ideas for decades. During World War II, coach Bud Winter, one of the greatest American track and field coaches ever, who specialized in sprinting, taught Navy pilots a relaxation routine so they could fall asleep fast, even in loud, stressful places. They relaxed the muscles in the face, dropped the shoulders, let the arms and legs go heavy, breathed out slowly, and cleared their mind for about 10 seconds. Winter reported that after about six weeks, most of the pilots could fall asleep within two minutes.[53] Versions of it still get passed around the military today. I've heard of Marines using it, and it works great for an athlete lying awake the night before a big game, or the bus ride into enemy territory.

Training Notes for Coaches

Coaches, build resets into practice, not just games. After a missed drill, have each athlete run their reset before the next rep. By game day, the reset runs on its own.



Your Next Step

Pick one reset with your athlete this week, physical, visual, or verbal. Have them use it in practice first, so game day isn't their first rodeo. Then watch for it in the next game.

Go Deeper: *Watch this chapter's free Huddle video and grab the Guided Reps training sheet at topathletehabits.com/ch7.*

Chapter 8:

Mental Reps Are Real

> ***"I never hit a shot, even in practice, without having a very sharp, in-focus picture of it in my head."***
>
> Jack Nicklaus

If your family doesn't take action, there's no point in reading this book. Every chapter so far ends with a step to take, and this chapter shows you how to turn those steps into a daily habit that produces real results.

The Daily 10 Minutes

Online gym rats will tell you that you need two or three hours in the weight room. You don't need that long. If you train with intensity, you can get a lot done in much less time. I have spent years studying and have a master's degree in dietetics and exercise science. A well-known sport psychologist from the '90s once told me, "Use that to your advantage in this industry." So I know a little something about performance outside of the mental side.

The mental game works very similarly to the physical game, because inside the body, the two are tightly connected. Your athlete can visualize for 30 minutes, or for three seconds before a shot, seeing the ball go exactly where they want it. Both of these count as mental training.

We highly recommend doing mental reps during physical practice, so game day isn't the first rodeo. Your student-athlete wouldn't break out a brand-new skill they saw on TV but never practiced, and the same goes for mental skills.

If you want a goal, aim for 10 total minutes a day. Reps are more mental than physical anyway. The physical part is doing them. The mental part is showing up when you don't feel like it, staying consistent, and finishing through. That's the real battle.

Below is a list of 10 different moments, out of countless moments and mental exercises, that could count toward the 10 minutes a day of mental training.

1. Morning mentality monitoring while brushing teeth
2. Planning out the day
3. Game film
4. Intentional focus on school work
5. Public speaking for leadership skills
6. Funneling into the performance
7. Locking in for practice
8. Visualizing the plays when bored
9. Planning with a teammate
10. Reflecting in the evening

"Follow the blisters, not the bliss."

Let's break that down. Ten minutes a day is 70 minutes a week. Over a 12-week season, that's 14 hours of mental training, about seven extra two-hour practices, for less time than one TV episode a day. Add that on top of the half of practice where they're thinking, "Oh man, this sucks,"

and wondering why they're even there. That's when we anchor back to their mountain goal from clarity and remind them that the blister moments produce the blissful views down the road.

Those reps compound, like doing more practice problems before a test, or benching the bar again and again. I've actually always preferred squatting much more than benching, because I love having beefy explosive legs and competing with my wife, but everyone talks about benching, so we'll stick with bench as an example.

It's no surprise daily reps turn into habits. In one well-known study, it took people a median of 66 days of daily practice for a new behavior to feel automatic, with a range from 18 to 254 days. Missing a single day didn't wipe out the progress.[29] Imagine that in season terms. About two months of the daily 10 minutes, and your athlete's mental reps start running on autopilot. I can attest to this. For the student-athletes who stick with our mental training, the turnaround within two months is night and day, from timid and confused to playing their best and then some.

Additionally, the mind has one big advantage over the body. In the weight room, muscles need recovery days. Your athlete still needs sleep and downtime, but mental reps can keep stacking every single day. So let's let them compound, baby.

Think of your athlete like a race car. Their strength, speed, and skill are the car's engine, tires, and sleek frame. Most families pour everything into those parts, and those parts only.

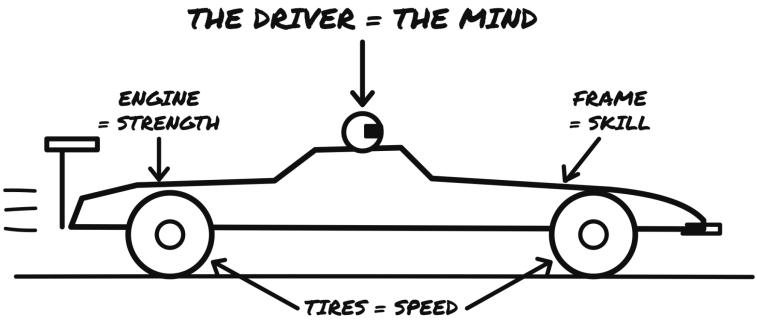

Fig 8.1 Mental reps train the driver, not just the car.

None of it matters if the driver can't handle the twists and turns at 200 miles an hour. Mental reps strengthen the driver. Tiger Woods started working with a psychologist, Dr. Jay Brunza, as a young teenager. His team trained the driver, in addition to his driver off the tee, long before the world ever saw him compete on national television.

One More Rep

If you've spent any time in a weight room, you've heard the words "one more rep." Your legs are shaking, the bar feels twice as heavy, and your coach or lifting partner leans in and says, or yells, it anyway. You grind it out. That last rep is the one that builds you, because it's the one your body didn't think it had.

It's my favorite phrase in all of training, and it fits the mind just as well as the body. We have it on wristbands, shirts, sweatshirts, and more as we keep growing. Strength coaches build athletes with progressive overload, asking the muscle for a little more weight or one more rep than last time. The muscle adapts because it gets pushed just

past what it's used to. Mental strength grows the exact same way.

In the mental game, one more rep might be one more deep breath before a serve, or one more run-through of the routine before a free throw. It might be one more reset after the third mistake in a row, right when your athlete wants to shut down. It might be one more round of visualization before bed when they'd rather scroll, or one more line of productive self-talk on the drive home after a loss.

It can also mean adding weight to the bar, more pressure, so they learn to push back with more explosive force. That may mean increasing the speed, the resistance, the role. It's the athlete challenging themselves. It's the parent seeing the push and pull, seeing where else can we support, where else do they want to go.

Those are the reps that count the most. Anybody can reset after the first mistake. The athlete who resets after the third one, with the gym loud and the coach frustrated, with the increased pressure, is the one getting stronger and turning into a diamond that shines under those bright lights. The mental muscle grows right at the edge of where they wanted to quit.

Parents get reps too. For you, one more rep might be one more question at dinner after the shrug, one more breath before you react to the ref from the stands, or one more "I love watching you play" after a game that didn't go their way.

I lived this in the high jump. I didn't go from 5'2" to 6'1" in one jump. It took hundreds of one-more-jumps, of harsh weight room and plyometric sessions, a lot of them with a

shoulder that wouldn't stay in place. Every one of those reps was one more beat of the performance pulse.

I continue to live it in business and entrepreneurship. I see this book as the culmination of the last three years of hard work and a jump start to what's coming next. It holds all the blood, sweat, and tears (all three, literally) poured into helping the next generation thrive and conquer their goals in a world that keeps pulling them back to being a rat on a wheel, running nowhere.

The Compound Effect

One rep doesn't change much on its own, and that's exactly where most families quit. Your athlete tries a reset once, nothing magical happens, and they decide it doesn't work. A single rep never looks like much, but stacked day after day, it changes everything.

Think about money in a savings account. Put in a little every day, and the interest starts earning its own interest. For the first few months, it barely looks like it's moving. Then the line bends and starts climbing faster than you ever added to it. Mental training builds the same way. Except it's more like entrepreneurship, where there's always a bigger challenge waiting to be solved, or in the sports world, won.

The math on the compounding effect blows my mind, and it's 100% real. I've seen it happen with my own eyes in the math, the science, and our athletes. If your athlete gets just 1% better every day for a year, it doesn't add up to 365% better. Each day builds on the one before it, so it multiplies out to about 37 times, or 3,700% better. Slip 1% every day,

and they end the year with almost nothing left, about 97% worse off. Small daily choices never stay small.

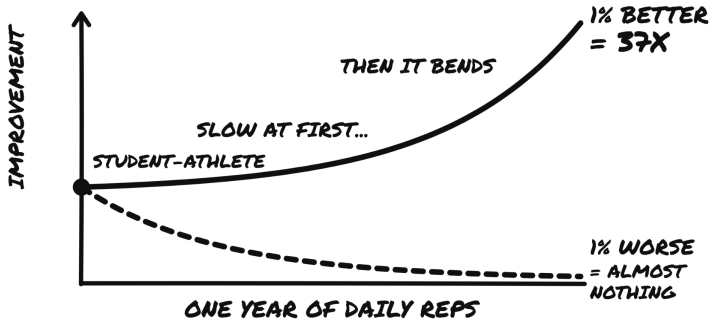

Fig 8.2 Small daily reps never stay small.

Watch how it plays out with the mental exercises in this book. In week one, your student-athlete takes one breath before every free throw, and it feels forced. By week four, the breath is automatic, so we stack a cue word on top. By week eight, the breath, the cue word, and three seconds of visualization run together as one routine, and they don't even think about it. Remember the 66 days from earlier? That's the compound effect at work, and every exercise makes the next one easier to learn.

That's why daily matters more than big. One big talk before the championship game is like one huge workout the day before a meet, and it does almost nothing. Ten minutes a day, every day, builds the athlete who stays calm when the game is on the line. Missing a day won't wipe out the progress, but quitting will.

Climbing a mountain works like this too. Nobody jumps, or teleports, to the summit. You take one step, then another, and after enough of them you turn around and can't believe

how far you've come. That performance pulse just keeps on keeping on. Stack the reps daily, give them time, and let them compound.

What to Say at the Dinner Table

I know plenty of families where the dinner table isn't really a thing anymore. You're running from one practice to the next, then to church, then to the other kid's game. That's why we built our training online instead of in one building. We come from those families, where a family friend sometimes had to pick up a little sibling because every other driver was already booked. We've done sessions while a parent was driving, because the car was the only time to fit the mental training in.

Whether it's the dinner table or the car, you can get mental reps in. One family we work with visualizes together before every tournament. When mom and dad do it, kids do it too, especially younger ones. A teenager might not listen to you the first time, and that's okay. They'll listen to a coach or a mental performance trainer who has worked with college and pro athletes.

One of these families had a daughter coming back from a torn ACL. She already had offers from Division I and Division II schools, but she was always down on herself, and she wanted to step up as a team leader. During our training, she and her dad started doing visualization together before every tournament. Picture the two of them in a hotel room the morning of a game, eyes closed, walking through her first possession on the court. They kept using everything we built, even in the off season. She



became the leader she wanted to be and then some, and then even more offers came in.

Think back to the families from Chapter 2 where parent and coach had blurred together. The first step was drawing a clear line. Sports stay on the court and the field, and the dinner table is for being a family. Mental reps can still happen there, through better questions instead of game film.

Think of the dinner table like a sales conversation. If you don't know anything about sales, that's totally okay. I personally love the performance psychology side of sales.

At least half of sports is selling. Athletes sell themselves on beating the opponent. The underdog that's sold on winning, more often than not, pulls off the upset. If that weren't true, Vegas would be out of business. That's also why I don't bet on sports. Your athlete can do the same thing for themselves. Every night, your student-athlete can sell themselves on tomorrow's training and how they'll get better.

So what are you selling at the dinner table? It starts with better questions. "How was school today?" gets you "Fine." Try "What went best today?" or "What was the craziest thing that happened at school?" If they say nothing happened, don't buy it. Ask, "What happened at lunch?" or "What's the most remarkable thing you heard today?"

Any of those can spark a real conversation and keep the relationship strong, no matter where your student-athlete ends up.

If pushback and the infamous "no" are at an all-time high, try this one. "You know, when you were a kid and we'd go

to the store, you never took no for an answer. What makes you think we can't flip those roles now?"

In Sports, for Life

These reps aren't only for game day. We want them at school, at work, at practice, at home, in the morning, and at night. The more reps your athlete gets, the more the mental side becomes muscle memory, or really, mind memory.

One of our very first athletes was a baseball player who loved the game but couldn't figure out how to stay locked in. His parents were big supporters, and they wanted him to have more help during some rough patches, in school and on the field. He also wanted to step up as a leader. We trained for a full year, keeping the game slow and helping him take control of it. By the next season, the mental reps were absolute muscle memory. He had a breakout year, earned all-conference honors as well as recognition across the state, and went on to pursue playing in college.

Your athlete will leave sports someday. Even an NBA starter eventually moves into a life outside the game. The habits your athlete builds for game day will carry them into the classroom, the job interview, and the boardroom.

That's why this book is written for you. When you know what mental training is, you know how to make a difference, what to look for, and how to be the game changer for your athlete. We at TAH can't be in every student-athlete's corner every time, even though we want to be. However, through this book, the free resources, and our other services, you can be in their corner every time, armed and ready, just like you already want to be. Every

rep is another beat of the performance pulse, and every beat moves them one more step up the mountain.

Mental training is never built from one source alone. It's built through constant reps from clubs, coaches, and parents. You may not know every mental exercise, but you can reinforce the basics every day, not just once a week. That's how mental strength gets formed.

Carrots, Sticks, and What Actually Builds Habits

Most of us grew up on the carrot and the stick. The carrot is the reward, like a sticker, a starting spot, or a pizza party after a win. The stick is the punishment, like running laps, losing playing time, or getting yelled at. Coaches use it, parents use it, and it does work sometimes.

The stick has a negative effect, though. We've all heard the stories of athletes running sprints until they're puking, then crawling to the finish because quitting wasn't an option. Some of them end up with heat exhaustion and spend days or weeks in the hospital, and some never come home. Nobody gets mentally stronger from that. They just get hurt.

The carrot and the stick come from behaviorism, one of the oldest ideas in psychology. We learn from what happens after we do something. Reward a behavior and it shows up more. Punish it and it shows up less. It sounds simple, and it is, right up until it goes too far.

What I Learned in the Lab

For my first master's degree, I studied stress and PTSD in rodents. Quick side note, by the time I finish this stage of continuing education, I'll have three master's degrees, so MS³, which is pretty cool. To study PTSD, the animals have to go through something stressful. In one setup, the mice were held in a small tube where they couldn't move much, and they got shocks to the tail at random times.

At first, they fought it. After enough shocks with no way out, something changed, and they stopped fighting. It sounds disturbing, and it's not the fun side of science, but it mirrors real life. Researchers call it learned helplessness. When nothing you do seems to matter, your brain learns to quit trying.[34] It's what these rodents demonstrated, and it's what student-athletes, and even humans in general, demonstrate too.

With student-athletes, I see versions of this. There's the kid buried on the bench who stops asking what they can do better, and the kid who gets torn apart after every game until they stop caring. They didn't get lazy. They learned that nothing they did changed anything. That's why we build habits the right way, with a loop that hands control back to your athlete.

The Habit Loop

Every habit runs on a loop with three parts, a cue, a routine, and a reward. Charles Duhigg made this famous in his book The Power of Habit, and there's a lot of research behind it.[13]

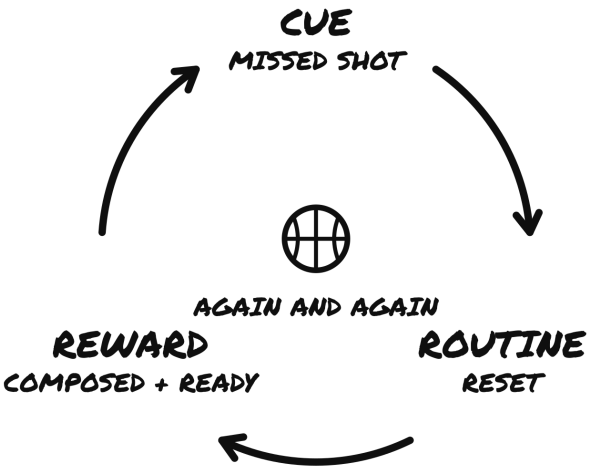

Fig 8.3 Train the loop until the miss becomes the cue to reset.

Now for a funnier example, the loop most of us live every morning. The cue is waking up cranky. The routine is grabbing a coffee. The reward is feeling human again. Maybe your cue is a headache, sitting down at your desk, or the first coworker who starts complaining. Either way, the loop runs, and before long you don't even think about it. Starbucks has whole loops built for its baristas to keep customers happy, but that's a whole separate story.

Another animal study shows what's happening inside the brain. Monkeys saw a shape on a screen, pulled a lever, and got a squirt of juice. At first, the brain's reward signal spiked when the juice hit. Over time, the spike moved earlier and earlier, until it fired as soon as the shape appeared, before any juice showed up. The brain started expecting the reward. When the juice didn't come, the

signal dropped, and the monkeys got furious.[48] Once a loop is trained, the cue alone kicks it off.

So now, let's put your athlete in it. The cue is a missed shot. The routine is their reset. The reward is staying composed and ready for the next play. We train that loop until the miss itself becomes the cue to reset, automatically. That's why we rep these mental exercises so much. We're training the response ahead of time, so your athlete already knows what to do when a high-pressure moment shows up.

Habit Stacking, Done Right

Habit stacking is pretty pop culture these days. You attach a new habit to one you already do, famously made clear by Clear himself in Atomic Habits.[10] The problem is that most people think it means cramming as many things as possible into a morning routine, and that's not what we're after.

Habit stacking works when it's done well. A meta-analysis of 94 studies found that if-then plans, like "When this happens, I'll do that," had a medium-to-large effect on people actually reaching their goals.[18] So imagine two athletes who both want a better reset. One says, "I'll try to stay calm." The other says, "When I miss a shot, I'll touch my shoelace and say 'next.'" The second athlete is the one who actually does it.

In one of the first sessions with a new athlete, we usually go straight to the meat and potatoes, the moment in the game they're trying to handle. Clarity still comes first, and we're still figuring out the big mountain goal, but we also want them to feel a difference fast.

We start with something they already do. Every athlete has a tic, something they do without thinking. They lick their

lips, click their fingers, clap, or tug on their jersey. That habit is already built, so we attach a reset to it. Then we tie that reset back to their main goal. In one session, we're already weaving a few pieces together.

From there, we keep stacking. By the end of 12 sessions, or a whole season, an athlete might have 8 to 12 or more mental exercises built on top of each other. It doesn't feel like 12 individual exercises, though. It feels like one routine, because it's all become muscle memory.

After three years of attempting to golf, I've now started taking golf lessons because I'm trying to get my game in shape, and I can feel it happening. One part of the swing stacks on top of the next. It's the same when I talk with Division I soccer players and coaches. They have the kick, the first touch, the pivot, and opening the hips all stacked and automatic. I've played some mediocre soccer and some indoor soccer with Division I athletes and a few Brazilians in the past, which makes me sound better than I am. I am not nearly to their level when it comes to soccer. I simply haven't stacked as many pieces and reps as they have.

The greatest of greats stack too. John Wooden taught his players how to put on their socks before anything else. Michael Jordan started with the chest pass. Michael Phelps stacked so many pieces of his swim performances that his coach had him practice swimming without goggles. In the 2008 Olympic 200-meter butterfly final, his goggles filled with water, and he won gold anyway, because he had already repped it.[13]

Their Exercise, Their Ownership

One of the biggest reasons our training sticks is that athletes come up with their own mental exercises. We guide it, but they build it.

We use a process called motivational interviewing. Instead of handing an athlete a script, we ask questions. What's happening in that moment? What do you already do that helps, even a little? What would you want to try? The answer comes out of their mouth, not mine. Don't worry, our questions are purposeful, and guide the training session, just like a sales conversation. A meta-analysis of 72 randomized trials found that motivational interviewing helped people change their behavior in about three out of four studies.[44] I'll take those odds, and I'd even bet we beat them.

When an athlete builds their own exercise, something clicks. They say, "This is mine." That's autonomy, and accountability comes right along with it. It's a lot harder to skip a reset you invented than one somebody handed you and told you to do. Research on motivation backs this up, because people stick with what they choose for themselves.[11]

So let's look back at a softball player who always taps her bat on her cleats before she steps in. Instead of inventing a brand-new routine, we'd ask what that tap could mean, if that could be our anchoring exercise, and she'd decide it's her reset. She owns it, so she uses it every single at-bat.

Sonar, Pyramids, and Rope

I picture these stacks growing in a few different ways.

The first is sonar. There's one main exercise in the game, the dot in the middle, and everything else sends out from there in rings, getting stronger with every signal.

The second is a pyramid. As an exercise gets strong, it becomes part of the base, and the base gets wider so we can add more on top.

The third is a rope. No good rope is one single string. It's strands twisted and braided together, and that's what makes it strong. Most of our athletes end up with about three go-to exercises that form the backbone, and everything else gets braided around those.

SLEEP, the Habit Behind Every Habit

Every mental rep runs better on a rested brain. Studies show it too. When Stanford basketball players stretched their sleep to about 10 hours a night for several weeks, their sprint times got faster and their free throw and three-point shooting each improved by about 9%.[33] I understand getting 10 hours of sleep for a teenager is unheard of, but picture your athlete hitting almost one more free throw out of every 10, just from sleeping even a little bit more.

I use the word SLEEP to make better sleep stick.

- S is for screens, so put them away before bed.
- L is for lips, and we suggest that anyone, especially our student-athletes, tape their mouths at night to breathe through their nose. Anyone we suggest this to thinks we're crazy at first, but then tells us what a difference it makes.
- E is for eyes, so keep the room dark or use a mask.

- E, the other E, is for environment, a cool, quiet, dark room.
- P is for present, so wind the mind down to the present moment instead of replaying the game all night.

The military sleep routine from Chapter 7 is a great way to start doing it.

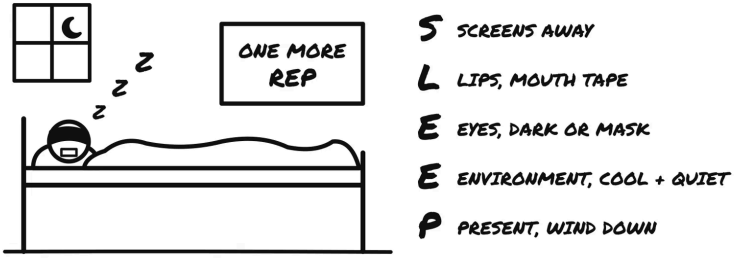

Fig 8.4 SLEEP is the habit behind every habit.

The Ps of Practice

I posted this once, and it's one of my favorite ways to make practice count. Before practice, run through three Ps.

- Purpose means knowing what you're practicing before you start.
- Process means picking the specific actions that will make you better today.
- Payoff means knowing how it will show up in performance, and then going out to make it happen.

One shot or one set of 10 both count as one rep. The best athletes think in chunks at practice, so in games they can lock into the one moment that matters.

Training Notes for Coaches

Coaches, mental reps can live inside the practice you already run. Add three seconds of visualization before free throws, or a breath and a cue word before every swing in the cage. That's how the daily 10 minutes gets done without adding time.

Your Next Step

Set a 10-minute window for mental reps this week and put it on the calendar like practice. Use it for a reset from Chapter 7, VTO from Chapter 6, or the mountain goal from Chapter 5. Then swap "How was practice?" for one better question at dinner or in the car.

Go Deeper: *Watch this chapter's free Huddle video and grab the Guided Reps training sheet at topathletehabits.com/ch8.*

Chapter 9:

Proof Is In The Performance

> ***"You have to work hard in the dark to shine in the light."***
>
> Kobe Bryant

I often talk about the mental game as the invisible game. It's like a ghost following your athlete around, and for some people, including friends I've known, it keeps haunting until it's too late. Tracking makes the invisible visible, and it's one of the biggest differences in how we train at TAH.

Tracking the Training

Years ago, I helped start a speed and agility business after a partner recruited me out of college. I learned a lot of lessons, including that business is simple, but also way more complicated than it looks. Along the way, we learned from Universal Speed Rating, a speed training business that tracked everything. Every sprint, every jump, the force of the first step, and the length of it all got measured. Tracking made their athletes more predictable, and it made them better.

The strongest and fastest athletes in the weight room track their lifts. The mental game deserves the same.

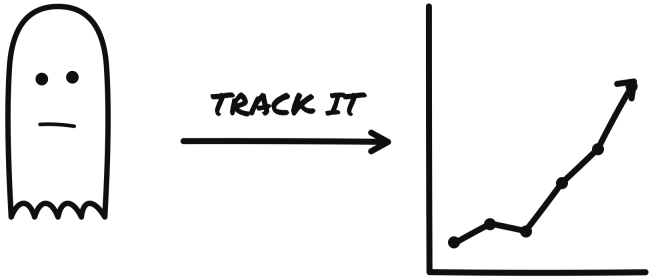

Fig 9.1 Track it, and the invisible becomes visible.

Tracking works, and it's as simple as that. What isn't tracked rarely improves. If it does, how do you even know? A meta-analysis of 138 studies with almost 20,000 people found that monitoring progress helped people reach their goals. The effect was even stronger when progress was written down physically or shared with others.[21] If you're doing this by yourself, writing it down and letting the family see it does a lot of the work for you.

At TAH, we have proprietary technology that helps track for our student-athletes, families, and teams, but you can do it at home too. Use tally marks on the fridge, a whiteboard, or a simple yes or no on the calendar for whether your athlete did their daily 10 minutes. One of our mental exercises, the 3 Gs, lives on the bathroom mirror.

- Given asks what you gave someone today, like helping out.
- Great asks what you did that was great.
- Grown asks how you grew and got better.

Your athlete checks off each day they answer all three.

Bring it up yourself, at dinner or in the car. Just know the car ride home isn't always the best time, especially after a loss. Pro athletes get a cooling-off period, usually 10-20 minutes, before they face reporters after a game. Your athlete deserves at least that much before they hear about the game from you.



Fig 9.2 Given, great, grown. Three checks a day.

Track More Than the Scoreboard

Everyone can see wins and losses. Baseball and softball families can quote batting averages in their sleep. You can track the mental game the same way.

We track how our athletes handle pressure, how they handle challenges, how much fun they're having, their confidence, and their growth over time. Fun is on that list on purpose, because it matters.

Picture a chart on the fridge. In September, your athlete rates their confidence a 4 out of 10. By December it's a consistent 9. That line going up is proof they can see.

"Beat your average, not your best. If you must compare, compare processes, not outcomes."

Remember the sixth-grade golfer from Chapter 2? After a couple of bad holes, he would lose it, sometimes crying on the course and having no fun at all. We tracked his rounds and his ratings the whole way. His scores weren't perfect every week, but the line kept climbing, and so did his confidence, his composure, and the fun he had playing. It even carried over into football and basketball. His dad wanted in too, so he learned the same mental exercises and could help his son right there on the course, not only by helping him remember, but by showing him.

When we started, his mental strength scores were a 6 or lower across the board, and some were down at 2s and 3s. By the end, he was touching 8s and 9s. We built a daily chain of mental reps, plus a chain on the course that linked one hole to the next while keeping each shot separate. We trained his resets, his self-talk, and his imagery, and we kept compounding them. Not every round was amazing, but he kept working the mental game, and it spread into his basketball and his weight, speed, and agility training too.

That proof feeds right back into confidence, because proof beats pep talks. Tracking gives your athlete a stack of evidence, and every check mark is a beat of the performance pulse they can actually see on the climb. I can't count the number of times I pull up an athlete's data and show them, not just tell them, all the progress and strength they've built.

Reflection works like game film. Good teams study film so they can speed up how fast they get better. After a game, ask three questions in order: what went well, what could be better, and what will we do next? This is our Oreo exercise from Chapter 6. Your athlete walks away with a plan instead of a pile of regrets.

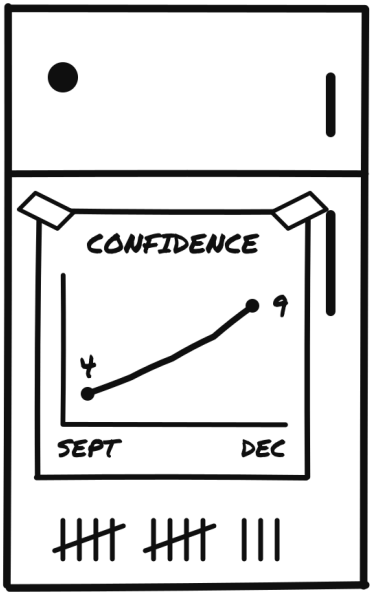

Fig 9.3 A line going up is proof they can see.

Everywhere We've Trained

When we first started TAH in Iowa, one of our big goals was to get trackable mental training into every school district in the state, for every student-athlete. It turns out there are a lot of hoops to jump through in high school sports. We haven't given up on that. Along the way, though, we found how valuable one-on-one training is, because we can figure out exactly what each student-athlete needs, and train that specifically.

We've done just about everything in between too. We've implemented mental training across entire clubs. We've trained high school teams, middle school teams, travel teams, and school teams. We've run trainings for school coaching staffs, and one-time assemblies for fall sports where coaches, athletes, and whole families came together. We've presented at sport conferences and athletic director conferences. We've trained athletes one-on-one at every level, from elementary school through Division I college. We've had great conversations with professional athletes too, though I wouldn't call that training with them.

Basketball was my first love, and I knew basketball kids who were struggling, so that's where we started. Since then, we've worked with athletes and families in baseball, softball, football, golf, swim and dive, soccer, wrestling, cross country, track, hockey, dance, gymnastics, car racing, tennis, and more. It doesn't matter the sport, because it is all performance, psychology, and physiology.

Numbers That Climb

We track a mental strength score from 1 to 10 for things like confidence, composure, and grit. I won't share every

detail of how we do it, as it is proprietary, and we're extremely proud of what we continue to build, but the trend lines tell the story.

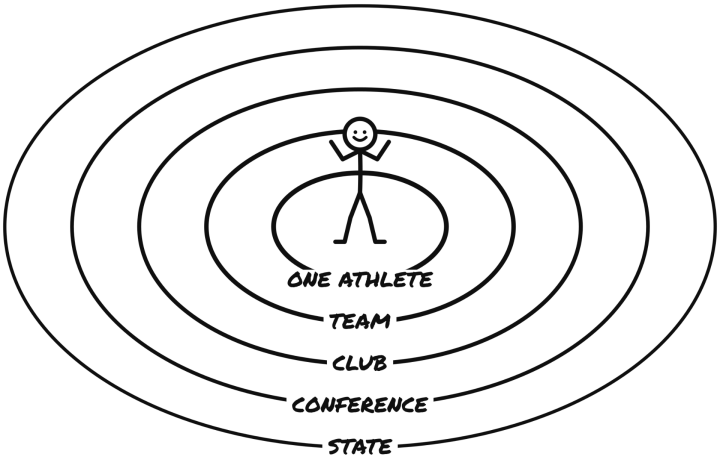

Fig 9.4 One athlete, then a team, then a whole state.

Remember the basketball player from Chapter 8 who was coming back from a torn ACL? Research continues to show female athletes tear their ACL more often than male athletes, and soccer and basketball are two of the riskiest sports for it.[37] She trusted her ability, but she was anxious and worried, and her self-talk was through the roof in the wrong direction.

By the end of our sessions, she was scoring 9s and 10s across the board. We kept training through the season, and she and her dad did the exercises together with full support. Then the offers started coming in. She went to camps across the country and played great, and after each one, we looked at what could have gone a little better. Even when it goes well, there's always something to sharpen.

Then there was a middle schooler whose family wanted to give him every advantage. He was smart, fast, and always working on his craft, not to mention newer to many of the sports he was playing, and the pressure at home was real. Some of his scores started down in the 4s, and others started high.

Once he got comfortable with our sessions, they balanced out. He carried the mental reps into piano, taekwondo, football, baseball, and basketball. His team made the championship and took second. They played okay, which wasn't the best he wanted or the best his parents wanted. That's still a win in my book, because he has years of growth ahead and big goals of playing in college. It's about the constant evolution, that compound effect, not one photo finish from middle school.

Teams That Scale

One basketball team we worked with had a super young roster. They played in the Mississippi Valley Conference, one of the toughest high school conferences in Iowa. That season, the coach credited our training with helping them knock off five ranked teams, including the No. 1 team, and in the seasons after, they made it to state. Tracking the data showed us exactly where the team wanted to grow next.

We also worked with a golf team. Golf teams cut players, so everyone on the roster could compete. Still, there were levels within the team. The players chasing a state trip were in a whole different mental gear, while the freshmen and sophomores were soaking it all in for the first time. All of them loved the trainings.

We also worked with a small-town softball team. The camaraderie they built was unmatched, both within the team and within the training. As they continued to use the exercises, tracked their responses, and trained the mental game, they battled through challenges, and more often than not, they came out on top. One of my favorite memories was when they were battling with their biggest rival. Down three runs going into the final inning, the coaches pulled them together and ran the exercises we'd built into their routine. They came back to win in a thrilling last inning.

My favorite might be a track team with a history of amazing graduates. It was one of my first times training a team, so it hits home. In track, you're up to race, and there's a lot to think about before the gun and after the finish. We did one training with them. Hearing the coaches and athletes talk about the mental exercises they took away, and seeing how it changed the way they raced, showed me how far one session can go when a team keeps repping it.

Why It Works

It comes down to the relationship. Rapport, how we relate to each athlete, and how we build with them are what we've taken to a whole other level at TAH. We know the levels because we've lived them. I spent years not even making varsity before I made it to state. The Murrays and Angie fought through tough recruiting before they played at the Division I level. We've worked alongside professional athletes, and we've watched family members quit sports. We understand the whole continuum, where your athlete falls on it, and what needs training next.

As I write this, Iowa is working to bring in a professional soccer team and an entire feeder program underneath it, and we're in conversations about providing mental training as part of it. Nothing is signed yet, but we're working on it. At conferences, some of the main organizers have also talked with us about the service, what they love about it, and where they want to see it go. It's one more sign of how fast mental training is growing in sports.

Ultimately, you can create your own stories like these. Grab a sticky note or a whiteboard, help your student-athlete track their mental training, and make the invisible visible in your household. Start today.

Training Notes for Coaches

Coaches, you already track stats, so add one mental stat. After each game, have athletes rate their composure or confidence from 1 to 10. Over a season, that line tells you more than the box score about who is ready for the big moment. I've collaborated with coaches and have seen this happen many times.

Your Next Step

Pick one way to track this week, like tallies on the fridge, a calendar, or a note on their phone. Track one thing, such as whether they did their daily 10 minutes. Then pull out the 1 to 10 ratings from Chapter 4 and rate the 3 Cs again in a month.

Go Deeper: *Watch this chapter's free Huddle video and grab the Guided Reps training sheet at topathletehabits.com/ch9.*

Chapter 10:

First Steps & Biggest Hurdles

"Whatever comes, just don't stop."

Phil Knight

The first step is awareness, and you've already taken it. You picked up this book because you noticed something. Maybe your athlete is freaking out after games. Maybe everyone at the next level is talking about the mental game, and you didn't know where to start. Maybe you know the mental game is what will get your student-athlete to that next level.

Either way, you now know the TAH structure, the performance pulse your student-athlete can train every day to climb toward their biggest goals.

Next come the hurdles. These are the ones I see families trip over most.

"Just Forget About It" Doesn't Work

Old-school coaches loved to say, "Toughen up. Just forget about it." Does that actually work?

Try this right now. Don't think about a pink elephant. What did you just picture? Psychologists have studied this for decades. When people try hard not to think about something, the thought often comes back even stronger.[52]

You saw how this stuck with those first through eighth graders in Chapter 5.

A review of dozens of thought suppression studies found the same rebound effect. When people try to push a thought away, it often comes back even stronger.[1] It's like a punching bag. The harder you hit it, the harder it swings back.

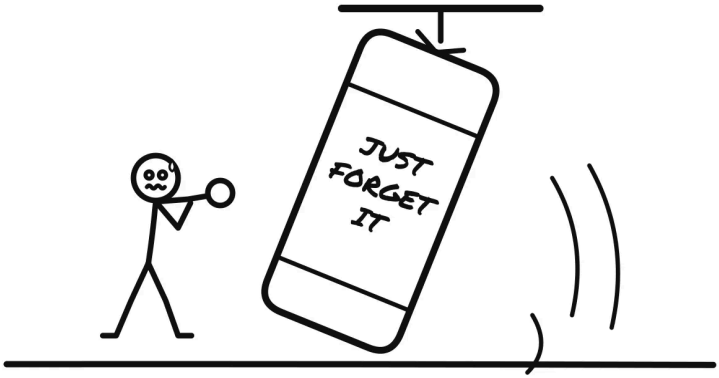

Fig 10.1 Push a thought away, and it swings back harder.

When you tell your student-athlete to toughen up, the first thing they wonder is how. What do you want me to do? What does that look like? Without a how, they have nothing to grab onto.

Think about the fourth-grade football hothead from Chapter 2. His parents told him to calm down and lead, but without a how, the yelling kept coming. Leadership takes reps too.

The same goes for "Just smile," "Move on from it," and "It's okay, next play." Is it actually okay? How do they move on? I love hearing these because they make me laugh. That's great, but if I told you to go bake a cake without any

instructions, how easy would that be for you? Without real mental exercises, those phrases turn into hurdles of stress.

I see the same cycle over and over. The family tries the phrases, and they don't work. They figure the next step must be counseling, and the athlete says, "Nope, I'm not going to a shrink." So everyone goes back to "Just move on from it," and the cycle repeats. Nobody finds the in-between, which is training.

When you do talk about it, use contrast. Say a don't, then a do. "Don't replay the strikeout all night. Do run your reset and plan the next at-bat." A don't by itself feels like criticism. A don't followed by a do drops their defenses and gives them a next step.

One Talk Won't Fix It

One talk or one training session won't solve everything. It can feel like it does, and that's the problem. One session alone is a Band-Aid, and I hate, hate, hate, hate the Band-Aid fix.

It's like popping the top of a zit while everything underneath is still there. What a beautiful image, right? It comes back in an instant, usually bigger and badder.

That first session opens your athlete's eyes. They handle one situation and suddenly see it's connected to everything upstream and downstream of it. Each of those situations needs to be trained, just like your athlete trains their body for every scenario they'll face on the field.

Look at the word fix again. We don't fix athletes, we build them. If your athlete is weak in the weight room, nobody fixes them. They train and get strong over time. The mental

game works the same way, through accountability, reps, and time.

Hurdles in Our Own Heads

Some hurdles have nothing to do with the athlete. They live in the rest of us too, so here are four I see all the time.

The first one is confusion. Most of the time, we know what to do, and we just don't do it. I tell athletes, and parents too, the same thing every time. I posted a version of this on X.

"Stop choosing to be confused. You know what to do, so follow through."

The second is avoiding conflict. Nobody likes the hard conversation after a tough loss. But if we avoid conflict, we won't reach success. The key is how you handle it. If there's disappointment, be disappointed with your athlete, not at them. One pulls them closer, and the other pushes them away.

The third is the blamethrower. After a bad game, it's easy to blame the ref, the coach, a teammate, or the weather. Every student-athlete gets to choose whether to grab the blamethrower or take accountability, and only one of those helps them get better next time.

The last one is putting it off. Ever wonder why professional athletes are called pros? It's more than a title. Pro comes from Latin and means forward. Procrastinate comes from

the same root, plus the Latin word for tomorrow, so it literally means pushing things forward to tomorrow.

Pros don't push it to tomorrow, they move forward today. When it gets hard, come back to the mental game and ask, "What's my next step forward?" That's moving like a pro, at any stage.

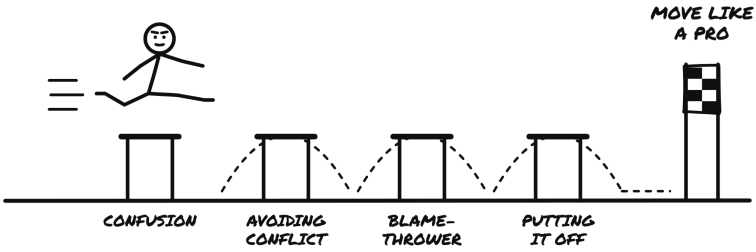

Fig 10.2 The biggest hurdles live in our own heads.

Start Tonight

Before you start, I want you to paint two pictures.

The first is the sport picture. I know how huge this is. Sports can pay for college, pay off debt, and change a family's future, and I've seen it happen. Beyond the money, think about the feeling it creates. Picture the tournaments your athlete plays in, the trips, the fun, the memories, and the celebrations.

The second is the life picture. Someday the sport ends. Picture your student-athlete at 40 and at 50, and picture yourself as a great-grandparent at 85. How successful are they with money, family, and life?

Every hurdle your student-athlete faces in sports, they'll face again in life. You already know that, because you've

played the game of life longer than they have. They've played sports, but they haven't played life yet. You will always have the wisdom. It's something I deeply admire in people and mentors older than me.

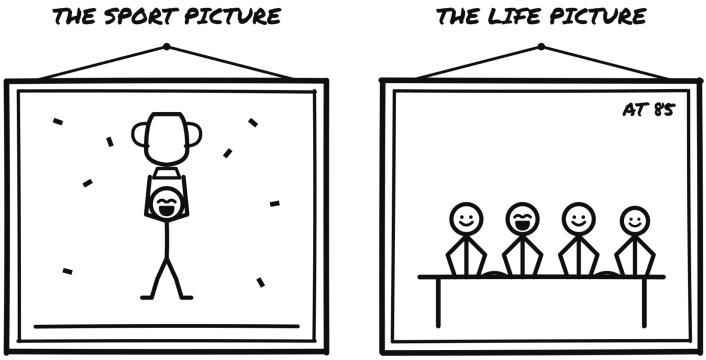

Fig 10.3 The sport ends someday. The habits don't.

That's why these first steps matter more than any mountain goal. And you're already climbing. You are the hero of this story. This book is just a map for a path to a secret treasure you didn't know was there, until now. By reading this, looking at the training, and taking action, you're already making a difference.

The first chance to make a lasting change was years ago. The second was this morning. The best one is right now. Dig in, anchor it to who your student-athlete is becoming, who they want to become, and watch them evolve.

Training Notes for Coaches

Coaches, retire "Just forget about it" from your sideline. Replace it with a how, like "Run your reset," or "Eyes on the scoreboard corner, next play." Your athletes will know exactly what to do, if it's been trained.



Your Next Step

Tonight, pick the phrase you say most after games, like "Just forget about it," and swap it for a how. Try, "What reset do you want to use next time?" Then let your athlete answer.

Go Deeper: *Watch this chapter's free Huddle video and grab the Guided Reps training sheet at topathletehabits.com/ch10.*

Chapter 11:

Questions Parents Ask Us Most

> ***"It's what you learn after you know it all that counts."***
>
> John Wooden

Every family that comes to us has questions before the climb. These are the ones we hear most.

How long until we see results?

I can't guarantee results overnight, but many of our athletes notice something change after the very first session. Then the reps take over, and the growth keeps building from there.

How long should we train?

Three months is a solid start, and six months is another great checkpoint, with a few weeks off here and there as seasons change. Some families think about tapping out after a month, but that rarely happens. That's why we work on a retainer, because seasons come and go and your athlete's needs change with them. It's also why we have our online training community, so people like you can always have the latest and greatest from TAH.

When does mental training end? Does it?

Does counseling ever really end? What about physical training, does that ever end? I'd like to say counseling should end at some point, but sometimes it seems to go on forever. With physical training, your athlete may eventually be able to do it on their own, but they should always keep doing it. Mental training works the same way. It doesn't have to end, but it can, and it can also pause.

It depends on the athlete, the family, and the situation. Some athletes want to meet in season to talk through games and prep for specific situations. Others are training a specific piece of their game. And sometimes the best thing to do is take a pause.

Over the summer, some of our athletes pause for about a month for trips, vacations, and time with their families. I've had a football player pause after his season and pick back up for baseball. I've had volleyball players do the same heading into club season or a spring sport like track, and softball players pause in the fall and then pick back up for basketball season. Off-season or in-season, the training stays with them, the tracking stays with us, and we pick up right where we left off.

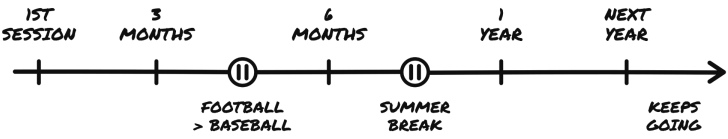

Fig 11.1 Training can pause, but it never really ends.

How does it work?

Our training happens online. We know your family is busy, and we don't want to add another drive across town. We still try to get together in person when we can, because that makes a difference too. But it's as simple as scheduling and hopping on the online call.

How will we know what's happening?

We take notes in every session, and your athlete logs their work in a tracking app. We also transcribe sessions so everyone stays on the same page. Like I said, our system tracks the training and makes the invisible visible. We believe in open communication. If your athlete gets hurt on the field, they tell you, and the mental side works the same way.

If something comes up that's truly confidential or bigger than performance, that's counseling territory. We don't handle that, and we'll help your family find a professional who does.

What are you actually doing in sessions?

We blend a few kinds of psychology into our sessions, including behavioral psychology, motivational interviewing, and sport and performance psychology. When it helps, we tie in nutrition and some basic physical principles too.

Counseling and coaching can look similar from the outside. A counselor often reflects and guides. We guide too, but we also give your athlete mental exercises to create as their own, train, and strengthen, the same way a strength coach shows you how to do the lift and then coaches you through it.

Whenever we can, we guide athletes to create their own mental exercises. Like we've said earlier, research on motivation shows people stick with things longer when they feel ownership of them.[11] When it's theirs, they use it.

Is my kid too young?

No, your kid isn't too young. We've done this with first and second graders at club programs. With younger kids, it's more about concepts and stories. Think about the lessons in Cars or Finding Nemo, like hard work, dedication, and perspective. Young kids already pick those up from movies, so we use stories they understand. Starting young is one of the best things you can do. Kids who build these habits while they're still learning their sport grab onto them faster, and the impact grows every year. It's still important to make sure they're ready to put in the work.

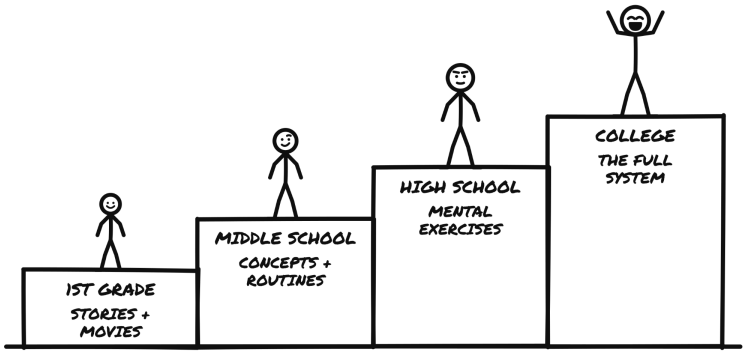

Fig 11.2 Never too young. The training grows with them.

What if my kid won't buy in?

That's where we need to talk, because a few things could be going on. You're the one paying for lessons, travel, and

training, so it matters. If there's no buy-in, we have to ask a real question. Does your student-athlete actually want this? We find that out pretty quickly in our training.

Sometimes the goal belongs to the parent more than the kid. That happens more than you'd think, especially nowadays. Some parents are reliving their glory days through their athlete, and the pressure lands on the kid. Every once in a while, we have an honest conversation with a parent about where that pressure is coming from.

That's why we always start with clarity. "What's your goal, and what do you want to do?" we ask the student-athlete. If it turns out the athlete isn't chasing it, we'll tell you, and we'll point you in a better direction. Sometimes it just takes explaining that mental training works like cross training, reps in one area that make every sport better. At the end of the day, we're not for everyone, and that's okay.

How much does it cost?

It depends on what your athlete needs and which level of support fits your family. We offer a few levels, and you'll see them in the next chapter.

How do we get started?

Start with this book. Use the mental exercises, take the action steps, and own it. This is just as much on the parent as it is on the student-athlete. When you want support and training, reach out and we'll talk.

Training Notes for Coaches

Coaches, parents bring these same questions to you about the mental game, usually in the parking lot after a tough game. Keep this chapter close so you can answer with the

same language your athletes hear in training. When a question goes past performance, like something confidential or bigger than the game, point that family to a counselor and stay in your lane.

Your Next Step

Write down the one question you still have after reading this book. Ask your student-athlete what they think, and then bring it to us. We'll gladly talk it over.

Go Deeper: *Watch this chapter's free Huddle video and grab the Guided Reps training sheet at topathletehabits.com/ch11.*

Chapter 12:

Your Athlete's Next Chapter

> ***"You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards."***
>
> Steve Jobs

Your athlete is training their mental habits every day, whether anyone plans it or not. They're either building habits that help them, or habits that hurt them.

Think about the strength and conditioning room. If nobody teaches proper form, your athlete builds bad habits and eventually gets hurt. The mental side works the same way. If you don't know what to help them train, I promise you your student-athlete is still training something.

TAH, Top Athlete Habits, is a premier service, and it isn't for everyone. That's okay with us. But it is a brand, one that's already making an impact on the next generation of youth sports and keeps growing because of people like you. That's why we built a few different levels so every family can get this training in a way that fits, while still being a premium service.

Our social media is level zero, with free resources and exercises posted for anyone who follows.

This book is the first level, so families everywhere can invest a small amount and start learning these concepts today.

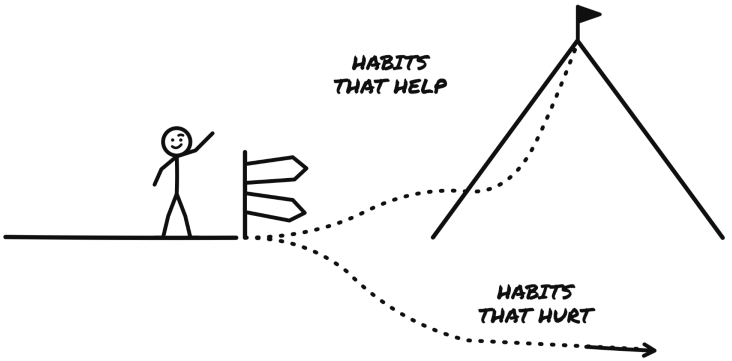

Fig 12.1 Your athlete is always training something.

Our online community is the next level. The mental game happens everywhere, so the training our student-athletes and their families do with us doesn't need a building. Parents learn the language so they can use it after games, and athletes get resources we keep adding all the time, including workbooks, live calls, and more mental exercises. We also have free resources and quizzes online to help you see where to get started.

We built the community because of families like one we worked with whose son was in sixth grade. They worked hard at everything, from school to piano to sports, and they wanted to give him every option.

His dad would get on calls with us for 30 minutes or more, asking great questions about what was happening and how each exercise was making a difference. Some weeks they couldn't see a big change yet, but they knew the routine was in place, just like piano practice at home. We realized

other parents had those same questions, so now they have a place to ask them and learn from each other.

We've also worked with families who invested a big share of their hard-earned money in one-on-one training, and we gave them our very best. But some expected a breakout game right away, and that showed us not every family needs one-on-one training to start. That's why we built levels.

Then there's our premier one-on-one retainer. We're in your athlete's corner as their performance coach. We focus on mental training, and when it helps, we dabble in nutrition and the physical side too, because we've lived in that world.

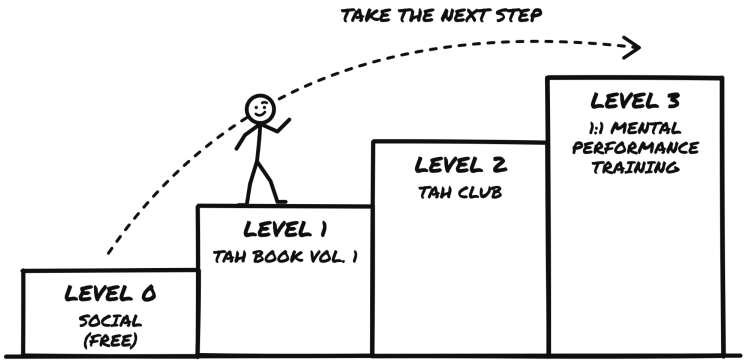

Fig 12.2 Pick your level, then take the next step.

If you want to learn more, check out the free resources, take our free quiz, or reach out and we'll look at whether it's a good fit together. We will make sure we find the level that's best for your family, and that TAH can provide you with the support, because that's what we do.

Picture your student-athlete five years from now. They're standing on a peak they once thought was impossible, looking up at the next one. They're clear on where they're going, confident they can get there, and composed when the trail gets rough. Their heart is pounding, and their performance pulse is steady.

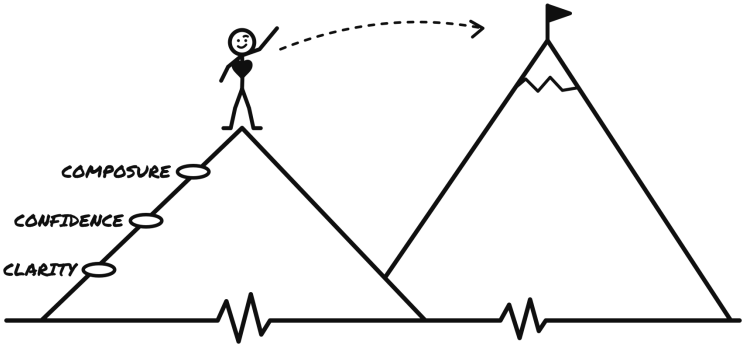

Fig 12.3 One peak reached, the next one in sight.

Back in 2017, spring of my sophomore year of high school, I pinned a tweet to the top of my profile, and I still believe every word of it.

"Put in the work, you'll make it."

Gabe Rummel, 2017, via X

Invest in the one piece that never goes away, the mental game, because it trains your student-athlete for performance, resilience, and life. Keep training it, rep after rep and season after season, because the mental game is never finished.

That's what we do here. We help student-athletes build confidence and handle pressure, in sports, for life.

Training Notes for Coaches

Coaches, your program is training mental habits every day too, whether you plan it or not. Pick one mental exercise from this book and make it part of practice this season, the same way you would add a lift in the weight room. Then share this book with your parents, so everyone in your program speaks the same language from the bleachers to the bench.

Your Next Step

Pick the level that fits your family. Keep using this book and get the most out of it, join the community, or reach out about one-on-one training. Then take the next stepping stone with your student-athlete today.

Pass It On

My goal for this book is simple. I want it to be so valuable to you that you can't help but share it. Send the link to the parent sitting next to you in the bleachers. Gift it to a coach who cares about their team. Buy a copy for the family whose kid just signed up for their first travel season, or committed to the next level.

If this book helped your family, leave a quick review at topathletehabits.com/review. A quick story with the before, the rep, and the after helps the next parent see what's possible.

Youth sports keep growing, and so does the pressure that comes with them. Every family that learns to train the mind adds one more student-athlete who now performs with trained clarity, confidence, and composure when it counts. When this book sits on your shelf, your phone, or your Kindle, and someone asks about it, and you pass it on, that makes all the difference.

Whether you work with us or not, you already have what you need to start. You have the 3 Cs, the mental exercises, and the one more rep mindset. Every daily rep is another beat of the performance pulse and one more step up the mountain.

Thank you for being one of our supporters at TAH and a part of our TAH family. It means more than you know.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, thank you to my wife, Angie, for always letting me chase this dream and take time away to work with student-athletes, their families, and their programs.

To my family and close friends, thank you. In a lot of business stories, you hear about people who don't support the dream. I've never had a family member or close friend make fun of me for this business. It's always been taken seriously, with real check-ins. We joke and jab about plenty of other things, but never this dream. For that, I'm eternally grateful to have you in my corner.

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To my coaches and mentors along the way who have taught me, and allowed me to grow my knowledge and pursue paths I never thought I would go down.

And to the many more not listed here, you know who you are. Thank you.

About the Author

Gabe Rummel, MS, is the founder of Top Athlete Habits (TAH), a high achiever, and a continuous learner who loves processes, systems, and the psychology behind performance.

Gabe started this work after watching so many people struggle to build the habits that help us perform and live well. Changing those habits as an adult is hard. So he set out to make an impact at an earlier age, with student-athletes who didn't have much help on the mental side. Along the way, he learned that connecting with athletes was only part of the job. The coaches and parents around them mattered just as much, so he took on more of a big brother role for athletes while partnering with the adults who support them.

Gabe has pursued the academic route, switching out of engineering right out of high school and earning a master's degree in dietetics and exercise science with neuroscience research on stress, and is now finishing a master's in sport and performance psychology while starting an MBA in business analytics. He has also pursued the entrepreneurship route, going through startup communities, accelerators, and business incubators to build a trackable mental training service for the athletes, families, teams, coaches, and programs who need it.

When he isn't training athletes, you'll find Gabe with his wife, Angie, a Division I soccer coach, working on their next project, watching a movie (holiday movies especially), getting outside, or building their strength together. Between the two of them, they see sports from every side.

About Top Athlete Habits

Top Athlete Habits, or TAH, started in Iowa as The Athletes Health in 2022 as a blog and health coaching business. Through 2024, 2025, and 2026, TAH pivoted to mental performance work in the youth community and went through three years of customer discovery and business building, eventually relaunching as Top Athlete Habits, anchored in what we really do, which is training the mental habits that help student-athletes perform, in sports, for life. A recent move to Utah for new opportunities has grown TAH beyond the Iowa community where it was built, and where it still grows.

TAH serves athletes and families at every level. Our free content online is for anyone who wants it. This book is a one-time investment in a crash course on our training philosophy, and it can transform how a family approaches sports. Our online community offers more instruction, built from years of one-on-one training, team trainings, workshops, and conferences. And our premier mental performance retainer service is for student-athletes and families who are chasing the next level, or who want that support in their back pocket as they grow.

Everything we do is systemized, so the process stays smooth and the training keeps getting better. We're building TAH into a brand that families around the country know, understand, and trust. Our student-athletes are TAH athletes, and we'd love for yours to be one too.

Learn more at topathletehabits.com.

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Gabe Rummel, MS, is the founder of Top Athlete Habits, a trackable mental training service for athletes, teams, clubs, and college programs. He holds a master's in Diet and Exercise from Iowa State, where his research focused on the neuroscience of stress. He is now completing a master's in sport and performance psychology and an MBA in business analytics.

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