

Introduction

As a kid, I loved watching professional sports and was always fascinated by incredible clutch performances. Let me test your memory on a few...

Do you remember “the drive”? When Denver Broncos quarterback John Elway took his team the entire length of the field in the final two minutes of the 1987 AFC championship game? If you don’t recall, Elway started the drive on his own 2 yard line with a jersey half covered in mud. He put together a string of incredible plays with the utmost composure - including two 4th down conversions. That drive tied the game and the Broncos eventually won in overtime with a few more heroic plays from Elway to get them into field goal range. Crazy!

How about Mark Messier guaranteeing victory prior to game 6 of the 1994 Eastern Conference Finals? His team, the New York Rangers, were down 3-2 in the series to the New Jersey Devils when he made his guarantee. In game 6, the Rangers found themselves down 2-0 and on the brink of elimination. However, Messier scored a hat trick in the third period to win the game. They went on to win the Stanley Cup. Incredible!

I can’t talk about clutch performances without mentioning the name Reggie Miller. Do you remember when he stunned the New York Knicks in Madison Square Garden with 8 points in the dying seconds of the 1995 Eastern Conference Final? His Pacers were down 6 points with 18.7 seconds remaining, when Miller hit a three. He immediately stole the inbounds pass, stepped back behind the arc, and hit another three to tie the game. A few seconds later, he was fouled and knocked down both free throws to close out the Knicks. Wow!

These athletes found a way to deliver incredible performances under enormous amounts of pressure. The question that always intrigued me was, How?

It certainly never felt like there was an element of luck involved. And sure there was some skill needed (to throw a ball, shoot a puck, or shoot a basketball), but, as I learned later in life, these performances must have been the result of having an exceptional mind. A mind that could focus, with composure and confidence.

Some say this ability is natural, but more recently in my coaching career, I have come to the realization that we have a great deal of control over our mind. We can train it for big-time situations like these.

I've played sports for almost 40 years, coached for 25, and taught for over 20. During this time, I've heard the words "mental training for performance" more times than I can count. They've been buzzwords floating around the sporting community, and yet it seems that many athletes don't know how to train the mind.

For years, the words continually went in one ear and out the other, remaining somewhat mystical. However, that all changed after an interesting experience I had in Thailand.

For the first 13 years of my working life, I was a teacher and coach at the University of Winnipeg. When my partner Angie was placed in Vancouver for residency, I was forced to leave a job I loved. Luckily, I was able to stay on part-time with the university, teaching month-long courses overseas in the areas of sport and science.

One of the teaching placements was in Bangkok, Thailand. Since the class ran in the evenings, I had loads of time during the day. I needed things to do. During the flight to Thailand, I set some goals for the month over a Thai beer. One of my goals was to extend my meditation practice to a full hour. For the past year or so, I had been using the Headspace app and the longest I meditated for was about 20 minutes. I had my work cut out for me.

The university put me into a two-bedroom flat, so I decided to turn the second bedroom into what I soon called "the meditation room." It was completely empty, except for an old

rickety wooden chair I placed a short distance from the blank white wall. On day one, I put a folded towel on the seat as a cushion and buckled down to begin extending my practice.

As I began meditating that first day, I heard the intense sounds of Bangkok in the background. I could choose to close the window to diminish the noise, but then the sticky 38 degrees Celsius would become a sweltering 45. The bulk of the noise was coming from a garage next door and the rattling of changing tires was more than enough to induce frustration. After fifteen minutes, I gave up.

After a week of struggle, the following Monday was a Thai holiday and thankfully the garage next door was closed. Without the noise, my mind was calmer and more settled. After some time meditating, I opened up my eyes to look at the timer and was shocked to see that 55 minutes had flown by!

In the last few minutes, I kept my eyes open because the plain white wall that was in front of me for the past week had turned into a beautiful collage of moving shapes and colors from the sun peaking through the curtains. It was a marvelous moment I will never forget... maybe because of the beautiful shapes and colors, or possibly because I accomplished my goal? Or both?

When I got up from the chair, I felt like a completely different person. There was a smile plastered on my face that wouldn't go away as I prepared to head out.

The condo building where I was staying, oddly, had a basketball court smack-dab in the middle of the complex. Since I was staying on the far wing, every time I entered or exited the building, I had to walk through the court. I passed by it multiple times since arriving, but this time I decided to put down my backpack, pick up the old worn-out basketball, and start shooting.

The first handful of shots went in, so I backed up to the 3-point line. Shots continued to go in with only a rare miss. I'd played a fair bit of basketball when I was young, but it certainly wasn't my sport. And I hadn't played (or even shot a ball) for years, which made this especially peculiar.

I stopped for a minute, observing that my hands were completely still and not jittery like they usually were at that time of day. Also, my eyes were working better than usual, able to see things in finer detail. And although I had a headache, my focus was spot-on.

I knocked down a few more shots. After 20 minutes or so, I left in comical disbelief. As I walked away, I needed to sit down on a nearby bench to process what just happened. I thought to myself, I just meditated for an hour and then shot the lights out... What the heck? Is the state of our mind more important for sport performance than I had originally thought? Did I miss the boat on this one for all these years? Is meditation the key to sport performance? I left these questions unanswered and carried on to the store.

The next day, I was excited to rinse and repeat... another hour of pleasant meditation followed by putting on a shooting clinic. However, the rattling sounds from the garage had returned and I couldn't find the rhythm I managed to find the day before. I felt defeated, so decided to pull the chute after about 35 minutes.

I went down to the basketball court to start shooting, expecting the magic to return, but this time the ball would not go in. The ball hit the front rim, the side rim, the back rim - even an air ball or two were mixed in. The harder I tried, the more it got away from me. This time I walked away puzzled. I returned to the same bench to process today's performance. I thought, Well clearly meditation is not the key to sport performance, but could it be the state of our mind? I left it at that.

For the rest of the month, I continued to run my experiment of meditating followed by shooting baskets. From this test, I determined that the state of my mind during

meditation was directly correlated with how well I shot the ball. By the end of the month, I could predict how well I would shoot as I approached the court.

This was my Ah-ha experience, when I realized that the mind holds the key to unlocking our best performances. Although I'd been told this a thousand times, it wasn't until I experienced it that I truly believed it.

A seed was planted in Thailand, but needed water, so I spent the next few months down a rabbit hole of googling "mental training for sport." I was watering the seed in preparation for another season of coaching volleyball. From my research, I found a variety of mental practices (other than meditation) and tested them out on my tennis game. When I found something I liked, I put it into a growing collection of tools I planned to use with my athletes in the coming year.

I was entering my second year with this group. Our previous season had been relatively successful on paper with some good wins down the stretch. However, it was a rocky road. The athletes liked the old way of doing things, questioning my coaching philosophy and tactics.

Going into that second year, I knew big changes had to be made. The plan was to devote a significant chunk of practice time to the mental side of the game (based on my new hypothesis). I would train minds, not bodies, and this was the perfect group to experiment with since the school had high academic standards and extra-curricular demands from both teachers and parents. My hope was that a change in our state of mind would ease some tension and allow us to have a more enjoyable and successful season.

In our first mental training session, I had the team do a short meditation followed by writing in their new journals. It felt uncomfortable, especially the idea of sacrificing fifteen minutes of practice time. However, when we went to the gym to practice

volleyball, it was by far the best practice we had since I started working with this group. It was quieter, with more focus, and the motivation to learn was high.

Before our next practice, I was questioning my new idea. I was tempted to jump-ship until one of the senior players walked up to me before practice and said with an excited tone of voice, “Hey Mike, can we meditate again today!?” That was enough to give me confidence in the plan and continue moving forward.

We regularly met before practices in our little classroom; meditating, writing, talking, planning. That year I was a teacher, not a coach. Every Monday I would hand out a sheet to each of the athletes consisting of my reflections of the past week, followed by my goals for the upcoming week. After doing this a few times, one of the athletes said, “I love these!” These comments added water to the seed that had been planted, which had now sprouted.

As the season went on, it became evident that the mental training was working. Everything became clearer for the athletes, who were now buying into my philosophy (which was quickly evolving to focus on the mental side of volleyball). We became a cohesive team, started to play with consistency, and win with regularity.

In the zone final, we came across a team that hadn’t lost all year. Earlier in the tournament, I overheard another coach say, “They’re a shoe-in to win it all.” It was hard to argue since they were bigger, stronger, more athletic, and more experienced than us. As the match began, we were tenacious. You could see it in our eyes. We wanted it more, playing some of the best defense I’ve ever seen at that level.

In the final few points, we were able to shock everyone (including ourselves) with a 15-13 victory in the final set. For the first time in my coaching career, I was part of a team that not only met, but exceeded potential in the playoffs. It was one of the most fulfilling coaching experiences I’d ever had, and I’m certain it was because of the time

we put into sharpening our minds off the court. The seed that was planted in Thailand was now a young plant.

To this day, I remain convinced that training the mind has the biggest impact on sport performance and is underappreciated. I believe every high performance athlete, or team, should make it a significant part of their training program. If it isn't yet a part of your regimen, this book is a great place to start. And if you've already begun training your mind, there will be things from this book to add to your program.

This book gives you the collection of mental tools that I've put together over the past 6 years. The tools are delivered through easy-to-read stories and experiences. Once you have the tools, it will take some work to practice them, but the reward of performing at your peak, when it matters most, is so worth it. This is what we play for.

Plant your seed, water it, and watch it grow.