

# **MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING FOR SPORTS**

**A Manual for Athletes, Coaches,  
and Sport Psychologists**

**Fourth Edition**

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**Dedicated to**

**Dr. James E. “Doc” Counsilman**

A truly valued friend, mentor, and role-model. Always my teacher.

One of the world’s premier sport scientists without whose help and guidance my practice and study of psychology would not have been possible. I am forever indebted.

Brent S. Rushall

February, 1992

## PREFACE

This text is written to assist athletes and coaches to perform mental activities that will enhance sporting achievements and minimize problems. Throughout my 30 years of coaching and sport psychology practice, the most frequent question that I hear starts with "What do I do to . . . ". This text attempts to answer such questions by providing step-by-step procedures for learning important mental skills for sports. The completion of the exercises contained in this book should assist athletes to control their psychological state in sporting situations.

Athletes, coaches, and sport psychologists should be able to use this book so that either, both, or all together can implement a mental skills training program. Mind training of this nature should be a valuable addition to sport training. It should facilitate and enhance performance.

This book is intended to serve three purposes:

- i. to assist athletes with no outside help to develop mental skills;
- ii. to assist coaches to implement a mental skills training program purely by directing athletes to do exercises and monitoring their completion; and
- iii. to assist sport psychologists, as part of their professional practice, to set "home-work" exercises to develop mental skills in athletes.

The exercises that are described must be done in their entirety and in detail. They need to be practiced until the behaviors that are targeted are easy to do, that is, they have become automated skills.

There are various opinions concerning how sport psychology services should be delivered. The behaviorist orientation to which I subscribe contains no mystical concepts but is a straightforward no-nonsense approach to developing mental skills in athletes. This tact

has proven to be acceptable to all classes of athletes from world champions and highly paid professionals down to high-schoolers. The value of this approach is that it indicates what to do and the effects that can or cannot be experienced.

These exercises should assist athletes in sport problem solving. A major use will be to implement appropriate exercises to avoid an athlete's continuing in a sport under unpleasant circumstances or mounting negative appraisals. Without attempting any mental skills training exercises, many athletes are forced to continue participating in a sport under aversive and negative thought conditions although, in most cases, the problem causes are relatively simple and easy to remove. Without any attempt to solve these problems, athletes could eventually stop participating in their sport. The exercises in this manual are the most common exercises that I give to athletes who seek sport psychology help. They require the athlete to take responsibility for their execution and evaluation, two important characteristics that need to be developed in athletes. Their simplicity and non-threatening nature leads to a high success rate for producing desirable outcomes.

Because of the way the exercises are presented and structured, a coach should be able to incorporate the development of these skills without incurring any extra coaching load. All that needs to be done is to direct athletes to commence a particular exercise and then monitor each athlete's attempts at exercise completion. This should inspire coaches to consider mental skills development as a program emphasis because the requirements for implementation are included in each exercise. I envisage the introduction of **MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING FOR SPORTS** to sport training occurring in the following manner:

- i. the coach conducts physical and skill development programs in the normal fashion;
- ii. each athlete has a copy of this book for reference and work;
- iii. the coach draws the athlete's attention to an appropriate exercise and directs him/her to commence the exercise;
- iv. the coach engages in periodic monitoring of the worksheets and progress logs for the exercise; and
- v. when needed, the coach serves as a resource for the athlete when questions concerning an exercise arise.

This involvement means that the coach has to be enthusiastic and serious about the program. Unless an athlete is highly motivated, a coach's extra push will be needed to continue exercises and to apply the concentration that they demand. That coaching enthusiasm and direction can be incorporated into normal coaching practices.

For particularly motivated individuals, exercises should be completed under self-recognition.

The underlying factor for success in mental skills training resides within the athletes - *they have to want to do it*. It would be my advice not to require any resistant athlete to participate in a program because it will most probably strengthen the resistance. What normally happens is that as other athletes begin to change through mental skills development, performances improve. The resistant athletes notice that change and most of them eventually decide to participate. That happened when I was working with the Canadian Olympic Swimming Team in 1976. A program of competition strategy skills development was initiated during the pre-Olympic training camp. Almost half the team opted to participate in the program while the others refrained. By the fourth week of the camp, another six athletes had requested to join the program because of the positive perceptions of the full-program participants. In the early stages of mental skills training, do not force athletes to participate against their wishes. Let

the recognition of the value of this type of work grow naturally.

There are athletes with whom I have been fortunate to be of assistance. Some of those individuals require special recognition because they provided insights into and suggestions for improving mental skills training procedures. Often these interactions occurred during the most stressful and important competitions of their careers. I wish to recognize those international performers and significant organizations that provided these opportunities.

**John Brass**, Australian Rugby Union and Rugby League  
**Phillip Smith**, Australian Rugby Union  
**Jan Murphy**, Australian Swimming, Olympic Silver medallist  
**Gillian de Greenlaw**, Australian Olympic Swimming  
**Karen Moras**, Australian Olympic Swimming, World-record holder  
**Russel Phegan**, Australian Olympic Swimming  
**Marguerite Ruygrok**, Australian Olympic Swimming, World-record holder  
**John Bennett**, Australian Swimming, World-record holder  
**Ardri Lasterie**, Dutch Olympic Swimming, European Champion  
**Ron Jackson**, Australian Swimming, Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Bill Ebsery**, Australian Swimming, Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Ian Alexander**, Australian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Peter Tetlow**, Australian Olympic Swimming  
**Indiana University Swimming**, NCAA Champions  
**Indiana University Basketball**, Big-10 Champions  
**Indiana University Football**, Big-10 Co-Champions and Rose Bowl contestants  
**Kelly Albright**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Gail Amundrud**, Canadian Swimming, Olympic Bronze medalist and Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Joann Baker**, Canadian Olympic Swimming  
**Wendy Hogg**, Canadian Olympic Swimming, World-record holder and Olympic Bronze medalist  
**Clay Evans**, Canadian Swimming, Olympic Silver medalist  
**Helene Boivin**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Barbara Clarke**, Canadian Swimming, Olympic Bronze medalist  
**Lisa Borscholt**, Canadian Swimming, Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Robin Corsiglia**, Canadian Swimming, Olympic Bronze medalist and Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Nancy Garapick**, Canadian Swimming, World-record holder, Olympic Bronze medalist and Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Jennifer Boulianne**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Judy Garay**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Cheryl Gibson**, Canadian Swimming, Olympic Silver medalist  
**Christine Hodson**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Suzanne**



**Kwasney**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Susan Mason**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Carol Klimpel**, Canadian Swimming, Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Lorinda Parkes**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Wendy Quirk**, Canadian Swimming, Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Susan Sloan**, Canadian Swimming, Olympic Bronze medalist  
**Becky Smith**, Canadian Swimming, Olympic Bronze medalist  
**Marian Stuart**, Canadian Swimming, Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Robert Bayliss**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Dennis Corcoran**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Chris Erickson**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Claus Bredschneider**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Wade Flemons**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Cameron Henning**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Bruce Kent**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**George Nagy**, Canadian Swimming, Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Richard Nagy**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Gary McDonald**, Canadian Swimming, Olympic Silver medalist  
**Bill Sawchuk**, Canadian Swimming, Commonwealth Games Champion and World-record holder  
**Michael Scarth**, Canadian Olympic Games Swimming  
**Graham Smith**, Canadian Swimming, Olympic Silver medalist, World and Commonwealth Games Champion and World-record holder  
**Peter Szmidt**, Canadian Olympic Swimming, World-record holder and Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Jay Tapp**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Dan Thompson**, Canadian Swimming, Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Graham Welbourn**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**Greg Wurzbach**, Canadian Commonwealth Games Swimming  
**David Brown**, Canadian Olympic Ski-jumping  
**Horst Bulau**, Canadian Olympic Ski-jumping, World Cup winner  
**Steve Collins**, Canadian Olympic Ski-jumping  
**Ron Richards**, Canadian Olympic Ski-jumping  
**Veli Rautio**, Canadian Ski-jumping  
**Lorna Sasseville**, Canadian Olympic Cross-country Skiing  
**Marie-Andre Masson**, Canadian Olympic Cross-country Skiing  
**Carol Gibson**, Canadian Olympic Cross-country Skiing  
**Jean McAllister**, Canadian Olympic Cross-country Skiing  
**Jane Vincent**, Canadian Cross-country Skiing  
**Yves Biloudeau**, Canadian Olympic Cross-country Skiing  
**Wayne Dustin**, Canadian Olympic Cross-country Skiing  
**Pierre Harvey**, Canadian Olympic Cross-country Skiing, World Cup winner  
**Dennis Lawrence**, Canadian Olympic Cross-country Skiing  
**Elizabeth McKinnon**, Canadian Swimming  
**Johanna Malloy**, Canadian Swimming  
**Tom Alexander**, Canadian Olympic Swimming  
**Andy Ritchie**, Canadian Olympic Swimming  
**Gordon Bertie**, Canadian Olympic Wrestling, World Cup and Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Egon Beiler**, Canadian Olympic Wrestling, World Cup and Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Steve Danier**, Canadian Olympic Wrestling, Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Clive Llewelyn**, Canadian Olympic Wrestling  
**James Miller**, Canadian Olympic Wrestling  
**Harry Geris**, Canadian Olympic Wrestling, Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Sean Barry**, Canadian Wrestling, Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Mike Barry**, Canadian Olympic Wrestling  
**Ray Takahashi**, Canadian Olympic Wrestling, Commonwealth Games Champion  
**Maureen Grace**, Canadian Rowing  
**Steve Wicher**, Canadian Rowing  
**Valerie Lafon**, USA Olympic Judo  
**Cathy Marino**, USA Olympic Kayak Team  
**Kurt Madden**, Two-time Ultraman Champion  
**Golden Bear Crew**, University of California, Berkeley, PAC-10 Champions  
**Paul Kent**, World Champion, New Zealand Commonwealth Games and Olympic Swimming  
**Deanne Hemmens and Traci Phillips**, USA World Championships and Olympic Kayak Team  
**Leah Rousset**, USA Olympic Kayak Team  
**1994 USA Men's Heavyweight Rowing Eight**, World Champions  
**University of San Diego Women's Swimming and Diving Team**, Pacific Coast Swimming Conference Champions.

*MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING FOR SPORTS* was written with the hope that coaches will commence to provide mental skills training for athletes so that sporting experiences will be less problematic and more balanced in terms of program emphases, and that competitive performances will be enhanced. I hope that the mental skills training exercise approach will be successful in achieving those ends.

Every best wish with your sporting endeavors.

Brent S. Rushall, Ph.D., R.Psy.  
 San Diego, California  
 December, 2008