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By **Dr. NATASCHA WESCH**

Mentally Handling THE BIG SHOW

Here's the situation: It's your first match at the Olympics, there's a big crowd, a very difficult opponent (maybe a top team from Brazil) and you are feeling like you are in WAY over your head. So how do you handle it? What do you do from a mental standpoint to keep it together?

Typically, and regardless of the situation, when we feel in way over our heads, it is often due to what we are focused on. Focusing on things that we do not have 100 per cent control over – such as the opposition, the large crowds, the fact that we are finally at the 'show' – results in anxiety, a perceived inability to control our surroundings.

On the other hand, by focusing on things that are within our control – our thoughts, actions and behaviors – we can shift the perceived stress to perceived control. Control translates into confidence, and confidence translates into better performance.

So, how do you make that happen?

First and foremost, it's vital to remember how you got to this point, how you qualified for the big event. There are several reasons why you got to the Olympics, and the most important reasons are related to things that are within your control. In other words, focus your thoughts on your strengths. What are your strengths in terms of the technical, tactical, physical and mental aspects of your performance?

For example, maybe you are a physically dominant type of player, with lots of power and speed (the physical). You have a great serve and an outstanding ability to dig anything that comes your way (technical). You are an intense competitor – you love to win (mental) – and you are able to read your opponent's game quickly (tactical).

Your focus must shift to these strengths in performance and in character. Those are the things you control, and those are the things that enable you to perform at the top of your game. By shifting your focus to your 'controllables' you move away from thoughts that activate your stress response (the 'uncontrollables').

Zero in on your strengths and put them into play. Keep it simple by focusing on your top three strengths. Also, add an internal dialogue to your thoughts by talking yourself through what you want to focus on, something like, "I am here because I am agile, I am powerful, and I can blast in a smash. Those are the things I do well and that's what I need to do now."

The next step is to calm your body and mind. If you recognize that your nerves are taking over, you must control the tension and anxiety. Mental stress turns into physical tension if not managed, and physical tension prevents you from being in the flow and in the zone. Relaxation techniques – such as breathing, imagery and centering – allow you to calm your mind and body in order to direct your energy towards your performance.

Most relaxation techniques aim to restore normal and restful breathing. When we breathe deeply yet not forcefully, we rebalance and restore the blood's oxygen levels. When we get adequate oxygen into our lungs and blood, we nourish our brain and muscles, both of which need oxygen to function optimally.

For example, a breathing technique that is effective for many athletes is what I call 'Belly-Chest' breathing. Focus on your breath and allow air to fill your lungs fully so that your belly expands slightly more than your chest. Place your hands on your chest and belly to feel the difference. Focus on this gentle breathing for a few sec-

onds and be sure that your breathing is gentle. The movement in your belly and chest should be barely noticeable to anyone but yourself.

As you breathe in this manner, imagine (see, feel and hear) the air coming into your lungs, entering your bloodstream as energy packets, and getting distributed to your muscles and mind. You'll notice your muscles relaxing slightly, but at the same time you maintain a sense of positive energy. Notice also how your mind clears and your thoughts become calmer, less chaotic. Focus on your breath for a few seconds, until you feel your entire body relax to a point where you feel that you are again in control.

Together, the techniques of focused thought, self-talk, and breathing will enable you to regain control and focus, and calm your mind and body to a level that enables top performance. Of course, like your volleyball skills, the above techniques need to be practiced and honed so that you can use them under pressure.

Practice these mental skills during training and throughout your day. The more you practice them, the more familiar they will become, and the more personal you will make them. Develop these mental skills so that they work best for you. As with your technical and tactical skills, you can't expect your mental skills to work well without practice.

Your mind is yours to control. Happy training and see you at the Games!

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