



POWER THOUGHTS

By **Dr. NATASCHA WESCH, PhD**

A common myth about the mind (or the brain, words I will use interchangeably in this article) is that it is a separate and completely different entity from the rest of the body. In other words, many assume incorrectly that what we think has NO bearing on how we perform.

The truth is that what we think directly impacts what we do and how we perform. You can be the most well-trained athlete in the world, but if your thoughts are performance debilitating, then your performance will falter.

For the sake of simplicity, here's a basic explanation of what I call the 'mind-body connection.' The brain and the rest of the body communicate often and quickly, and do so through chemical signals. All those thoughts we have do not have any meaning to us until we attach an emotion to them. We associate emotions to thoughts based on previous experiences (our own, or what we've heard from others).

The emotion is how we make sense of the thought.

When we associate a positive emotion (happiness, joy, etc.) to a thought, our brain sends chemical signals to the rest of the body to dilate the blood vessels, slow the heart rate, relax, etc. This allows us to stay in control and be able to think purposefully.

However, when we associate a negative emotion to a thought (fear, anger, etc.), our mind sends out stress signals to the body and it responds by increasing the heart rate while the muscles become tense, shutting down the 'thinking brain' and going into high alert. This results in the feeling of jitters or nerves.

The way we think is somewhat of a habit. Habits can be good or they can be bad. The good thing about bad hab-

its is that they can be changed through proper practice and repetition. As with any new skill, thinking positively requires some attention and practice. The key is to know what types of thoughts to focus on. But it's also important to know what thoughts tend to be debilitating.

Typically, the thoughts that tend to set off the stress response are those that focus on *things over which we have little or no control*. For example, when we focus on thoughts that fall into any of the four following categories, we trigger the stress response in the brain and body:

1. Outcomes – the consequences of winning or losing, or the fear of losing or underperforming, etc.
2. Self-intimidation – when we compare ourselves to others and what others can do, who they are, etc.
3. Worrying about others – about what they think or what they might say.
4. Injuries and mistakes – worrying about making mistakes or fearing injuries.

So, the idea is to first of all be aware of your thoughts. Once you become aware of your internal dialogue, you must recognize the thoughts that increase your stress and replace them with thoughts that increase your confidence.

If you want to be able to think the right thoughts in crunch time, first you must identify what thoughts you want to use that bring about confidence. That is, focus on the things that you control, that you are good at (your strengths), and on the things that allow you to be successful at what you do.

Here's an example: Say you have a representative team tryout tomorrow. You may be thinking about all the people that will be there, what the scouts will think of you, if you'll make mistakes, if you'll be good enough, etc. Assuming you associ-

ate fear with such thoughts, then you will set off your brain's stress response.

You will feel nervous, anxious, and maybe even nauseous. This will affect your performance, and not in a good way. However, if you change those thoughts to focus on the things that you can control and on your strengths, such as your power and speed and even communication skills, then you will begin to directly affect your performance and increase your confidence.

So, how can this work for you? Here's a simple exercise that you can practice.

First: Prior to your next practice or match, identify the three things that you control and that you can do to have a successful performance. What are your three key performance factors? Think in terms of mental approach, technique or skill, strategy or game knowledge, or physical play. What are you good at or what makes you the athlete you are in your sport?

In short, what are your strengths? What sets you above the rest?

Second: During your practice or match, focus your thoughts on the three key performance factors you have identified. If your mind starts to wander to more negative or distracting thoughts, come back to your key performance factors. These are your power thoughts for that performance.

To take it a step further, once you develop consistency in this way of thinking, begin to identify key performance factors for a few main areas of your game (e.g., the serve). Be sure to limit the key focus points to three, otherwise your brain will have too much to think about, which is a whole other problem!

By using this mental technique, you will choose to focus on the power thoughts that lead to a successful performance, and quickly replace or eliminate the negative thoughts that hinder your performance.

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