Psychology of Fighting

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FIGHTING

BY DR. RANDY BORUM
he “stare down” right before the fight. The last chance to play mind games before the leather starts to fly. No contact. No talking. But there is definitely an exchange. Each fighter trying to intimidate the other before the battle begins. Sometimes it turns ugly. Witness Heath Herring’s pre-fight knockout of Yoshihiro Nakao after Nakao tried to mess with Herring’s head by kissing him on the lips.

Fighters use different tactics to get into their opponents’ heads. During pre-fight interviews they may talk about gaps in the other one’s game. They may talk trash, boast about the pain they will inflict or the speed with which they will win. Your opponent may kick down the door to get in your head, or you might leave the door open and invite him in.

Whether your opponent does it to you or you do it to yourself, having him in your head in a nagging, negative way is a problem. Think of it as an attack on your confidence and focus. Your belief in yourself and your ability to keep your head in the fight are two of the most important skills. You have to keep your guard up.

When you are making a plan to defend against these mind games, remember that confidence and concentration are skills. Sure, some people are naturally better at it than others. But they are skills that you can train and improve upon. Like all fighting skills they get better with practice.

Confidence

Confidence is usually defined by sport psychologists as an athlete’s belief in his ability to perform a desired behavior. According to researchers, confidence improves your performance in many ways. Confidence causes you to set more challenging goals for yourself; put forth greater effort; have better focus and concentration; and become less anxious in threatening situations than people who feel less sure of their abilities.

Feeling confident reduces anxiety and “negative emotions,” and it promotes positive emotions, which further boost performance. Confidence also gives a fighter a boost of psychological momentum that can keep him focused on fighting to win, not just avoiding a loss. All those benefits really stack the deck in your favor when you step into the ring or cage or onto the mat.

You can be confident without being a great fighter, but it is hard to be a great fighter without being confident. How do you build and defend confidence for a fight? The first requirement is good training and conditioning. Your confidence
should be based realistically on how you have performed in the past and how you have trained to perform in the upcoming fight. Self-assurance, without skill to back it up, is just false confidence.

You are more likely to feel confident in your ability to work hard for three, five minute rounds if you have been regularly training at a high-intensity for four or five minute bursts at a time. The requirements of the fight should seem easier than what you have accomplished in training.

You can draw on your past successes. Think about the people you have beaten in the past. Think about training or sparring sessions where you completely dominated your opponent. Think about how much you have accomplished in training for this fight. Even if you are selectively focusing on your best moments, your past success will provide a very credible push to your confidence.

Visualization and positive self-talk also can be powerful confidence boosters. You can rehearse in your mind a variety of situations that you may encounter with your upcoming opponent, and visualize yourself working through each of them effectively. Mental practice is not as beneficial as actual practice, but it definitely helps. It can enhance your confidence in the fight because you will have met those challenges before in your mind.

Positive self talk will also build confidence. You might develop a list of positive fight related self statements based on how you see your strengths and abilities. You might have some statements that relate to your preparation like, “I have trained well for this fight. I have met every training goal.” You may have some that relate to specific facets of your fight game like, “I’m very comfortable on the ground. I can control my opponent from my back and dominate from the top.” You may also have some that relate to your self image as a winning fighter like, “I am an explosive, hard hitting fighter. My hands and my takedowns are extremely powerful.”

Notice the words “explosive” and “powerful.” These are examples of emotional cue words. You may just have a list of these kinds of words you can rehearse in your head. They are quick and easy to use and will help ramp up your intensity and bolster your confidence.

With these strategies you are protecting your confidence by taking an offensive posture. You are not just trying to get rid of the sinking feelings of doom or the nagging thoughts as they creep in. You are no longer reacting, you are directing. Your mind is not waiting for input, but you are actively engaging your mind about what thoughts to think and your body about what sensations to feel. It is much harder to worry over negative thoughts, when you are rehearsing positive ones. In fact, if you are in doubt about what to do, just act the way a confident fighter would act. Behave as a confident person would and you may find that the positive thoughts and feelings follow more easily.

Focus

By allowing your opponent to live inside your head, besides losing confidence, the other hazard is losing focus. Concentration, like confidence is a skill you can learn. We are talking about your ability to identify and keep your attention on fight-related cues, and not to be distracted by irrelevant cues.

When fighters talk trash or intentionally behave in a disrespectful way, they often are trying to throw an opponent off his mental game. The goal is to get him thinking about things that are unrelated to his fight preparation or to arouse emotions that disrupt his arousal/intensity regulation. When you allow that to happen, you let your opponent have a degree of psychological control over you.

You know what is relevant. You know your optimal zone of arousal or intensity. By actively managing the perceptions that you control, you are not as vulnerable to having your opponent tamper with them.

Concentration is not just controlled by an on/off switch. You have to use it in different ways at different times for different functions. Sport psychologist Robert Nideffer says that concentration can be more broad or narrow in scope and more internal or external in its direction. A broad-external focus might be taking in all the sights and sounds of the arena as it is “on fire” before the fight. A narrow-external focus might be watching your opponent’s hands. A broad-internal focus might be a “gut check” reflection on how you are feeling before the fight. A narrow-internal focus might be feeling the muscular tension in your shoulders and neck or hearing the voice that says, “You’re going to lose.”

Before and during a fight you will be constantly moving between different levels of concentration. As you wait backstage, you may be strategizing about how you plan to show a high level of aggression early in the fight (broad-internal). As you move around the ring during the fighter introductions, you may be visualizing the initial fight contact (narrow-internal).
When you take charge of your mind, it is tough for an opponent to get inside your head. Keep your confidence high, stay focused and fight hard.

This description may make concentration sound like a lot of work. In truth, with practice your head will go to the right place at the right time and filter out the stuff that does not matter. You will be in the present, not thinking about what just happened or what is going to happen. This is the feeling of flow or being “in the zone.” You are executing flawlessly, without consciously thinking about the steps, and without analyzing your performance. But it does take practice.

The visualization and self-talk strategies already mentioned can also be helpful here. For example, if you are hearing your opponent’s trash talk you might say to yourself, “That doesn’t have anything to do with this fight. He’s trying to distract me so that must mean he’s worried about pitting his skills against mine.” You might also use your cue words. You might visualize yourself being calm and relaxed while your opponent throws a verbal fit or does something else in the ring or cage that is likely to distract you. You mentally rehearse staying focused.

Another drill you can use to improve distraction control during a fight is to intentionally use distracters during training. You might get a recording of a crowd – maybe cheering, maybe booing – or even get a group of other people from your school to watch and to yell. Another trick is to play irritating music or sounds very loudly during training. If you are having trouble thinking of any, National Public Radio has “The Annoying Music Show” that features some of the worst music ever recorded. After two rounds of Alvin and the Chipmunks or vomiting sounds or babies crying, a booing crowd or loudmouth fighter might not seem so bad.

We often use music to pump us up when we train. This exercise helps us perform when the environment around us is antagonizing. If you want to throw in an extra twist, you can designate a corner person to communicate with you through the interference. You might try this first with high-intensity pad work, then work up to doing it during full-speed sparring.

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Matt Lindland
UFC veteran and current coach of IFL’s Portland Wolfpack. Olympic Silver medalist Greco-Roman wrestler and regarded as one of the best middleweight fighters in the world.

MMAA: What do you do to mentally prepare for a fight?

ML: I just focus on my game plan and think about what I can control. The stuff that is out of my control I don’t think about.

MMAA: Have you ever done something specifically to try to get in someone’s head?

ML: Yes, in interview or things you say in the press or directly to the other fighter. Look at the Phil Baroni fights. He brought it out in me.

MMAA: What are some examples of what an opponent has done to try to intimidate you, either physically or mentally? Did it work?

ML: I can’t really recall so it must not have worked.

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