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Mental Training for Combat Sports

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[by Dr. Randy Borum]

*Mental Training for Combat Sports

All martial artists want to improve. Many have even searched for the "secret" that will unlock their potential and take their game to the next level. Well, there is no secret. But there are proven strategies for boosting your performance. And I'm not just referring to training harder or practicing more. I'm talking about working the mental side of your game.

Psychologists began studying sports behavior in the late 1800s to explore factors and conditions that affect performance. Any martial artist, boxer or fighter who's ever competed or had to defend himself knows that victory requires more than good technique. Physical skills are necessary for successful performance, but in a competitive or threatening environment, your ability to focus, regulate your physiological arousal and manage your fears and self-doubts is critical.

Focus and self-confidence are two essential traits for success in the martial arts, the author says. (For illustrative purposes, Kathy Brothers is shown.)

Mental factors are equally important in training. Learning to properly execute a punch, kick, takedown or submission requires a foundation of neural pathways between your brain and your muscles. Mental practice, much like physical practice, can facilitate the formation of those pathways.

Applied sports psychology is a relatively new area of study, but elite martial artists have practiced the fundamental principles and skills for centuries. Consider, for example, this quote from Bruce Lee:

"Do not be tense, just be ready, not thinking but not dreaming, not being set but being flexible. It is being 'wholly' and quietly alive, aware and alert, ready for whatever may come."

He's talking about a martial artist's ability to manage anxiety and control physiological arousal, particularly under

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pressure. He describes a particular state of mind and body that's optimal for performance. The "zone" or state of "flow" isn't necessarily the same for everyone, and that means you must determine what fits. You can't simply copy what works for others. And you must be able to alter that intensity by ramping up or calming down as necessary.

Lee said, "Always be yourself, express yourself, have faith in yourself, do not go out and look for a successful personality and duplicate it."

Having faith is critical for successful performance. It's easy to know that you've learned a move, combination or technique, but you may have doubts about your ability to execute it when you're under attack. In a fight, many things can happen to undermine your confidence, but without that confidence, you may find it difficult to follow a game plan, use good technique and make good decisions. Self-confidence, self-faith—or what psychologists call "self-efficacy"—is the cornerstone of making your mind work for you.

Another bit of wisdom from Lee: "As you think, so shall you become."

Your thoughts are both causes and consequences of your actions. Sometimes you try to tell yourself what to think. At other times, thoughts—often negative thoughts—seem to intrude. Lee's quote is quite similar to a biblical proverb: "As a man thinks in his heart, so is he." (Proverbs 3:27) If you're going to perform complex skills under pressure, you must learn how to eliminate thoughts that distract and promote thoughts that support your best performance.

More from Lee: "When performing the movements, always use your imagination. Picture your adversary attacking, and use *jeet kune do* techniques in response to this imagined attack."

Mental imagery, or visualization, is one of the most powerful tools in your arsenal. You can use it to develop motor skills, self-monitor and prepare for competition. It combines the mental, emotional and physical elements of your performance. But there's more to effective imagery than just picturing your hand being raised at the end of a fight.

"A goal is not always meant to be reached, it often serves simply as something to aim at," Lee said.

As a masterful teacher, he realized that goals chart a course for success. Research shows that goals that are challenging but achievable improve performance and produce results. They enhance motivation. Goals shouldn't just be focused on an outcome, like winning, but on performance and mastery of a skill.

Sports-psychology researchers and martial arts masters have shown that arousal regulation, self-confidence, positive self-talk, focus, mental imagery and goal setting are the foundations of a fighter's mental game. What many don't realize, however, is that these are all skills. As with any skill, some people are born with more than others, but almost everyone can improve. In the coming months, we'll tackle these and other topics to help you take your art to the next level.

About the author: Dr. Randy Borum is a professor at the University of South Florida. He's a licensed and board-certified psychologist recognized by the National Institute of Sports Professionals. To contact him, visit www.blackbeltmag.com.

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