

A three-step formula for competition readiness: From Preparation To Execution

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When an athlete prepares well, has the talent, but simply doesn't execute, it is frustrating and often puzzling to figure out what went wrong. At the Olympics, it is relatively rare to see a total performance collapse. When athletes underperform at the Games, the most common phenomenon is a series of small, atypical mistakes and changes in performance. Added up together, these changes and mistakes derail the performance just enough to create a below-average performance. Over the years, in my work as a sport psychologist, I have tried to determine what factors are present when athletes underperform and what it is that allows some athletes to perform at their best, time after time. After eight Olympics, I have observed a few consistent factors that result in strong performances.

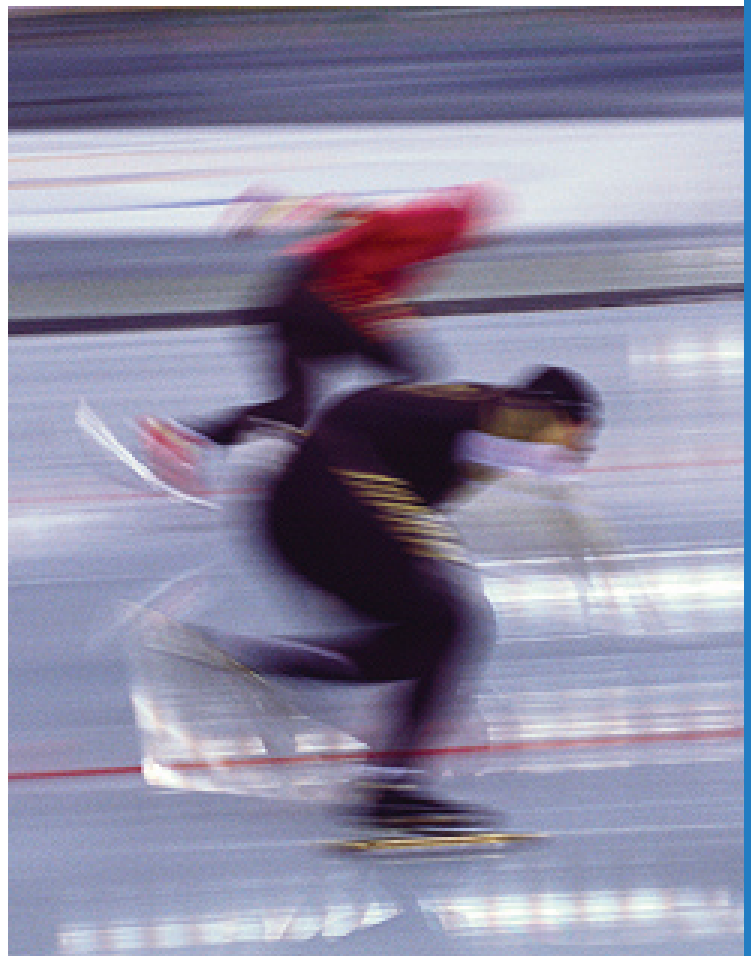
KEY TO STRONG PERFORMANCES- BEING IN "EXECUTION MODE"

*When you're out there in the big league **pressure** cooker, a pitcher's attitude -- his utter confidence that he has an advantage of will and luck and guts over the hitter -- is almost as important as his stuff." Bill Veeck*

Athletes do not have to be "in the zone" or having a "peak experience" to perform well under pressure. But there are some basic characteristics of an athlete's mindset when things go well. I call it "execution mode", a state of mind in which an athlete has simple thoughts, a very clear idea of what she needs to do, and complete confidence that executing this clear idea will mean success.

- 1. Simplicity and Clarity of thoughts.** For best performances, athletes are operating with a stripped-down, uncluttered mind. Technique has been reduced to a shorthand. Strategy is a simple idea. The internal mind is quiet, but the senses are open and aware. Thoughts are almost completely in the present.
- 2. Certainty regarding focus.** During best performances, there is no confusion or uncertainty about where the mind should be. Athletes are sure they are on the proper performance path, which makes it easier to keep proper performance focus. Certainty and the absence of doubt reduces self-consciousness.
- 3. Confidence in approach.** Athletes who perform well are completely confident that what they are doing is correct. With this confidence, they can fully commit to the simple, clear ideas above. They know exactly what they are trying to execute, and they trust. They trust that executing this plan will be enough for success. This trust and confidence decreases the tendency to become defensive, and increases the ability to stay relaxed, athletic, and aggressive.

Virtually every athlete in every sport I have talked to about these issues agrees that these three factors are present in great and good performances. Most consistently strong performers will agree with these ideas but they often say that they hadn't really thought



about these factors or given them a name. For most successful athletes, they discovered how to get into that state of mind by trial and error. I believe coaches can help a much larger number of athletes get into execution mode by setting it as an explicit goal for competition and explaining that there are three steps on the path to execution mode.

EXECUTION MODE- THE END STAGE OF COMPETITION PREPARATION.

While developing an effective competition plan is an ongoing task for elite coaches and athletes, this column will be limited to the short-term process that takes place within the time frame of a competition. What steps does a well-prepared and talented athlete take from the arrival at a competition to the point of successful execution?

It should be helpful to your athletes to break down the path to execution mode into three separate and essential steps. These are the three steps that all successful athletes must learn to incorporate into their competition preparation process.

Let's take the example of a national team that arrives at an international competition site, two or three days before competing. There are lots of tasks to accomplish to be ready to compete. It is important to note that athletes can not be and should not be in execution mode during that entire time. There is a time and a place for questions, analysis, critique, expectations, complex thinking, distractions and coaching during this time period, but as athletes move closer to competition, an athlete's mindset must change. The following list of changes, gives a sense of the differences between an athlete's mind upon arrival at a competition and the moment that competition starts.

<i>Mindset When Arriving At Venue</i> →	<i>Mindset When In Execution Mode</i>
Paragraphs	Bullet Points
Left Brain	Right Brain
Critic	Cheerleader
Past, present, and future	Present only
Questions	Answers
Wide Open	Filtered
Student	Graduate
Abstract	Concrete
Analytical	Action-Oriented
More	Less
Considering	Committing

STEP ONE- BUILDING A FOUNDATION

Arriving at a big competition, there is much to do, much to think about, and much information to gather. This is the point where the last years, months, and days of preparation in general must be integrated with the specific issues of this competition. As coach, you must be sure your athletes are aware of location specifics, that they are prepared for anything unique in this environment, that their equipment is in order, that their technique is solid, that they understand all the logistics of this competition, and that they believe they can do well here. If your athletes have questions, distractions, concerns, or doubt, you want them to surface and get addressed here and now, rather than later. Remember, athletes will not be able to move to the next step, unless they are sure that their foundation is solid. You may not like that your athletes have basic concerns about their technique or equipment two days before the World Championships, but if you don't let athletes express and work through those concerns now, be ready for these issues to surface under stress, right as the competition begins.

As a coach, it may be helpful to recognize that you are going through a parallel process. You arrive at a new venue, figure out the best route to the venue from your hotel, determine where and when the coaches meeting is, work through logistics, wonder about your athlete's state of mind and body, wonder if you have prepared them properly, look for any special opportunities or challenges this specific venue creates, develop a mental map of your environment, set up your coaching tools, have more discussions, think through any other details, manage any personal distractions, and only then, can you move on to the specifics of getting each athlete ready to compete. You need a solid foundation to coach effectively, and your athletes need a solid foundation before they can move on as well. Together, you must be convinced you are ready for step two.

STEP TWO- IDENTIFYING SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE KEYS

Step two is the easiest step to overlook or skip. Step two is the conscious narrowing and transformation of thinking from the general to the specific. Step two moves from broad strategy to specific tactics. Here an athlete moves from basic technique to the application of technique for this specific competition. Step two requires decision making, calculation of risk, and a search for the most essential performance keys. This step is the point where an athlete may have to admit their limits, or get out of their comfort zone, but still find a way to get the best result possible. An 800 meter runner may be more "comfortable" running from the front, but determine that this is a poor strategy given the tendencies of his competitors in this race. A wrestler may "prefer" an attacking

high-risk/high-gain strategy, but decide that against this opponent a better result is likely to come from a calculated “counter-move” style.

Sometimes the calculation and decision making of step two is an open discussion between athlete and coach. For example, a ski racer may worry that a line is too risky and aggressive, but acknowledge that holding back here will not produce a podium result. In this case, the ski racer and coach may have to work hard together to see the best strategy and help the athlete believe she can execute it.

As a coach, you will know your athlete is ready for the final step when they can answer the question- “What are the two or three things you must do to perform well?” To answer these questions well, they must consider their own abilities, the specific competition challenges, and begin the process of commitment. Commitment always means letting go of options, and making a choice. As a coach, you must help your athletes see that there is only one best choice for success. From this choice flows a few specific performance keys that will become the blueprint for thinking in execution mode.

STEP THREE- MOVE INTO EXECUTION MODE.

If you have ever coached a supremely confident athlete on a performance roll, you have seen an athlete who has figured out how to flip the switch and get into execution mode. While it is easy to see that this athlete exudes confidence and certainty, and

knows how to keep thoughts simple and clear, it is harder to see that this is a product of work rather than a personality trait. The work allows an athlete to trust and helps the athlete manage worry. Worry is a kind of multi-tasking, which always interferes with high performance. An athlete who worries is usually stuck on step one or two.

No athlete will be able to consistently get into execution mode without having done the work in steps one and two. As a coach, you can help by developing a system that walks your athletes through this process. In a recent Olympic Coach column, I wrote about the value of pre-competition routines. One way to think about effective routines is that they are a mechanism to take an athlete into execution mode. Routines reduce the multi-tasking of worry, keep thoughts simple and clear, and help an athlete feel confident.

As a coach, perhaps the most helpful thing you can do to get your athlete into execution mode is to name it, and emphasize that this way of thinking and behaving is a specific goal for competition. Some athletes may never have thought about it, and most athletes have not thought about it as a multi-stage process. The figure below may help explain that there is a time and place for all kinds of thinking at a competition, but that an athlete should be moving towards a specific kind of thinking when the clock starts or the whistle blows. Some coaches who see this figure quickly realize that this model also describes the process of coaching. Are you a coach who can get into your execution mode?

