

## Is your negative mindset setting you up for failure?

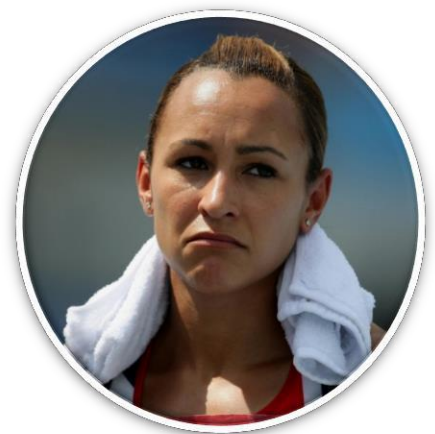
In a recent meeting with the parents of a talented teen squash player, they were concerned about their son's difficulty to embrace game challenges and having a defeated attitude even before the game started. Despite the teen player winning the first game in a recent match, his body language suddenly changed when he encountered challenges in the second game. The young player ended up losing the next two games, and consequently, the match. When I later spoke with him, he mentioned that he was aware of the opponent's higher seeding and, before the match even started, he was expecting to lose. Although he started by playing well, his self-prophecy eventually became a reality.

It seems more common than not that before a game or match begins, an athlete becomes overly preoccupied with factors that might negatively affect the outcome of his/her performance. The focus of attention is on the potential risks rather than on maintaining a positive outlook.

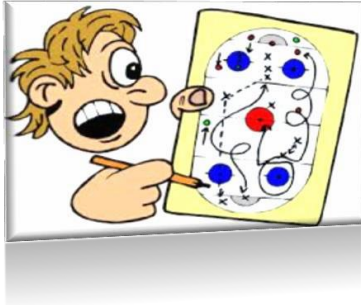
Their minds begin to spin negative scenarios; their heart rate accelerates as they already envision poor results. This pre-game routine may not necessarily stop athletes from trying hard and attempting to do their best. However, what it tends to happen is that when small obstacles get in their way, these athletes are more likely to throw the towel. Maybe the athlete is not fully aware, but he/she has inadvertently programmed his/her mind to quit trying. Although underperforming becomes a repeated pattern, it is often justified under the eyes of the athlete, who finds reasonable excuses for the negative outcome.

Unless we make a conscientious effort to change this expecting-to-lose mind- set pattern, an athlete will become victim of his/her own mental doing. Soon enough, the athlete will primarily look at the negative aspects of his/her performance and zero in on these outcomes as a way to justify his/her losses. Unfortunately, in order to avoid a repeat of this outcome, the athlete lowers his/her expectations only to eventually leave the sport all together. This is a dangerous habit where there is no upside potential.

Jack Nicklaus, regarded as the most successful golf professional and greatest winner of Major golf tournaments, noted that most golfers were intimidated by the tough golf course layout in Major championships. He said that most golfers were primarily concerned with the fast pace of the greens or



the long length of the rough. He felt that other golfers' focusing so much on the negatives was giving him an edge. Nicklaus embraced the toughness of the course by setting up strategic golf course management that would give him the greatest chance to beat the course. He studied each hole meticulously; he envisioned each shot with as much detail as possible, and he constantly gave himself positive feedback. Part of his course management strategy included the study of the safest areas where to err a shot that would still give him a good chance to salvage the hole.



Just like Jack, athletes should approach his/her game with enthusiasm and full of positive energy. Each athlete devotes a lot of time and effort to get ready for his/her upcoming event. I am sure most athletes would like to spend more time improving certain parts of their technical or endurance skills.

However, when the game is about to start, each athlete is facing an opponent whose mission is to beat the other. It is at this precise moment when his/her mental skill should be sharp and working on his/her favor. In order to improve your chances to perform at your best, the following recommendations might be helpful:

### **1. Recognize what is out of your control:**

The way the golf course has been laid out, the seeding of the opponent, the calling of a referee, the cheering of an opposing crowd, and how the opponent responds to your shots are ALL factors you have NO control over. It is a complete waste of your energy to focus on factors that are out of your control. Spend some time going over factors you have no control over and come to terms that, no matter what happens, you have no control over them. These factors are just part of the sport you chose, and as such, embrace these obstacles rather than fight them.

### **2. Recognize what is within your control:**

How you physically, strategically, and mentally prepare yourself to compete are all factors you DO have control over. When you see a water pond in front of a golf green, bring full attention and visualize the shot to where you want to precisely land the ball on the green. Zero in 100% of your attention on the positive outcome and trust you will do just fine. If your tennis opponent just won four games in a row, bring your attention to what do you well. At this point of the match, it becomes a mental game. The stronger you are, the greater your chances to turn it around.

And, if you lose, you will still feel much better knowing you did your best to win.

### **3. Have your own plan (just like Jack):**

Show up to your game knowing what positive self-statements you will use throughout the competition. Maybe you say: I trust in my own game; or I am strong and will stay with it; or I have powerful legs. It does not matter what positive statement you choose. For as long as you use it consistently, it will enhance your chances to perform at your best.

If you find yourself defeated before the game even started, bring the attention back to what your strengths are, embrace the positive side of you, as a person and an athlete, plan a sound strategy and go for it.





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