

Article: Gatorade EDGE

I wrote this article for the Gatorade EDGE digital project while at VML. Although our copy was certainly researched and written to support our client, we had access to “real” sources including sports scientists, trainers, nutritionists, and experts at the Gatorade Institute and IMG Academies. This article, with a target audience of serious young athletes, focused on the importance of mental conditioning and positive self-talk in the quest for success on the field.

Headline: Mind Over Matter: How Mental Conditioning Can Make You Better

Deck: Athletes have tremendous power to improve their performance and control their mind-set with positive self-talk. Trevor Moawad, Director of the IMG Performance Institute, uses this strategy to train top athletes, from career-minded hopefuls to the world's best.

Byline: Holly Lawton, Gatorade

You probably don't realize it, but there's a little voice inside your head that's talking at the speed of a mile a minute.

If you're like many young athletes, that voice might be working against you. It's telling you that you just can't keep playing in this heat. Making you worry that you won't hold on to the ball. Convincing you that it's not your job to speak up when your team needs a spark.

That little voice, according to the Edge Learning Institute in Tacoma, Wash., is flooding your brain with up to 1,400 words in 60 seconds. When you hear something over and over, you usually end up believing it. You need to manipulate that voice into building you up instead of hammering you down.

That's Trevor Moawad's job — teaching athletes how self-talk can make them better on the field and throughout their lives. It's known as mental conditioning, and it's part of the strategy for Moawad, Director of the IMG Performance Institute, in developing "the total athlete."

Moawad and his IMG Academies team in Bradenton, Fla., believe that a player's performance breaks down into four key areas:

1. Athleticism and training habits
2. Movement and agility
3. Character, thought patterns and communication
4. Life skills and life-changing decisions

Mental conditioning falls under the category of character and how an athlete develops his mind-set.

"We want to make the mind more of an asset and less of a liability," Moawad says. "How the mind impacts performance is what we focus on, how attitude can be a powerful weapon. But it can also hurt you, so you have to learn how to manage that.

"It's not that attitude is everything, it's that the *right* attitude is everything, and that's a skill that you can train."

Here's how Moawad and his team help young athletes improve that skill:

- Moawad strives to speak on the athletes' level, which includes a lot of instruction and coaching through video and other visuals. Key topics include self-talk, setting goals, dealing with adversity, and managing their parents' expectations and their own.

- The IMG team shows motivational video of athletes who have experienced success, and even of others who have failed so the youngsters can learn what *not* to do, too.
- Affirmations are targeted directly toward the athlete in first person, present tense — “I bounce back quickly” or “I want the ball in pressure situations.”
- As the IMG team records the activity in the weight room and on the field, the camera follows only the athlete, so the kids can see what a coach sees for a more objective view of their actions and reactions.
- The young athletes go through a battery of concentration exercises, imagery exercises and visualization scripts. They also write down positive phrases and simple strategies on note cards that they keep with them.

“Aptitude is important, but a bad attitude or weak mental approach, no matter how talented you are, it can derail your season or career,” Moawad says. “We see it happen every day in every sport. Whatever you think is real, is real.”

It may be hard to grasp that one negative thought can have so much influence, but Moawad says that when athletes tell themselves “I blew it — I can’t do this” after dropping a pass, they need 10 positive experiences to counteract it. Players must cultivate a strong self-image *before* they see success, not after. So they must train their internal monologues toward an encouraging thought process that pushes away distractions, such as hostile fans on the road.

One of Moawad’s clients and mentors, world-class sprinter Michael Johnson, learned to keep only four phrases in his head right before a race: *Keep my head down. Pump my arms. Explode. Think like a bullet.* With multiple Olympic gold medals and world championships, Johnson got results that speak for themselves.

“We have more power than we realize to determine what direction we’re going and how we feel about it,” Moawad says. “This is like advertising to ourselves 24 hours a day, and we’ll buy whatever we’re selling.”

Moawad stresses that the benefits of mental conditioning reach far beyond athletic pursuits. For example, only a small number of college football players move on to the NFL, and even then, the average career is barely more than three seasons. A positive self-image, strong character and good communication skills will serve athletes well when they must leave sports behind.

Is it tough sometimes to get players to subscribe to a mental conditioning program that’s just as important as the physical one? Considering that IMG Academies works with 800 young athletes from 80 countries, Moawad’s philosophy seems to have plenty of buy-in. He also has worked with the University of Alabama and Florida State University, the U.S. Soccer Federation, the Jacksonville Jaguars and numerous professional athletes.

“Athletes are like you and me walking into a grocery store without a shopping list,” Moawad says. “You buy some things, but not always the right things, and you leave others out that you needed. Just like with a shopping list, from a mental perspective, you have to go in with a plan.”