



*Providing information to individuals and teams seeking optimal performance*

## Mental Toughness – Everyone Knows What It Is, Right?

I frequently hear athletes and coaches use the term “mental toughness,” and I bet that you do too. The last time I heard the term used was during an early match in the recently concluded U.S. Open tennis tournament. During the broadcast, John McEnroe said this about a player: “He’s streaky and is not known to be very mentally tough.”

I think we can all fairly accurately guess the meaning of the term “streaky.” But what did McEnroe really mean by the term “mental toughness”? Since he didn’t give a definition and we can only guess, it may turn out that even he may not have a clear definition. In my experience, this is not an unusual occurrence. I have constructed performance profiles for several teams during which players and coaches identified the quality of “mental toughness” as important. However, when asked to define what the term means, they have often said, “an athlete that is tough, mentally.” When asked to clarify this further, they have struggled to give more specific and detailed answers.

Interestingly, sport psychology also has been wrestling with the same issue. In 2002, Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton noted that “mental toughness is probably one of the most used but least understood terms used in applied sport psychology” (p. 205). Levy et al. (2006) noted that mental toughness suffers from a “lack of conceptual clarity and general consensus as to its definition” (p. 247).

Jones and his colleagues (2002) highlighted this lack of consensus by conducting a review of the sport psychology literature. They found various definitions of mental toughness including: “an ability to cope with or handle pressure” (e.g., Goldberg, 1998), “an ability to overcome or rebound from failure” (e.g., Dennis, 1981), “a refusal to quit”

(e.g., Gould, Hodge, Peterson, & Petlichkoff, 1987), and “the possession of superior mental skills” (e.g., Loehr, 1995).

Why is it important that we have a standard definition for mental toughness? Once this definition is determined, coaches, athletes, and sport psychologists will be “speaking the same language.” Also, we will have a better idea of which athletes do and do not possess “mental toughness.” Then, we can construct individualized training programs to help all athletes become more mentally tough and thus hopefully perform better in their respective sport.

### *So What is Mental Toughness?*

Two recent studies by Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton (2002, 2007) attempted to “define and identify key attributes which underpin mental toughness” (2002, p. 206).

In the first study, Jones et al. (2002) interviewed 10 athletes with international competition experience. These interviews resulted in mental toughness being defined as “having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to generally cope better than your opponents with the many demands (competition, training, lifestyle) that sport places on a performer. Specifically, this involves being more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focused, confident and in control under pressure” (p. 213).

When categorized, the identified attributes of mental toughness were: self-belief, desire and motivation, performance-related focus, lifestyle-related focus, dealing with competition-related pressure (external) and anxiety (internal), and dealing with physical and emotional pain (p. 215).

For the second study, Jones et al. (2007), interviewed three coaches and four sport

psychologists (all of which had worked with elite athletes), along with eight elite athletes.

These findings were consistent with the 2002 study regarding both the definition of “mental toughness” and the attributes involved. In addition, this study further identified the attributes of: using long-term goals, controlling the environment, regulating performance, handling failure, and handling success. The subjects also noted that the attributes play an important role in the development of a mentally tough mindset during different time periods such as training, competition, and postcompetition.

### *The Bottom Line*

Recent research is helping to establish a clearer and more consistent definition of mental toughness. While the experts in the studies above noted that some athletes are naturally mentally tough, one of the most important research findings is that experts believe that the skills related to mental toughness can be learned.

Readers will note that the topics addressed in every issue of *Performance Enhancement News* are in some way related to helping athletes develop mental toughness. I am also in the process of creating a program for athletes in the North Alabama area geared toward developing mental toughness. If you are interested in such a program, either contact me directly or watch for a formal announcement either on my website or in future issues of this newsletter.

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For more information about this topic or any other topic related to mental skills or sport psychology, contact your local sport psychologist.

## Dr. Moncier's Upcoming Speaking Engagements

Date/Time	Location	Topic	Contact
November 9, 2007 2:00 – 5:00	Alabama Psychological Association's Fall Mini- Convention Doubletree Hotel 808 South 20th Street Birmingham	Mental Toughness: From the Playing Field to Clinical Practice	Pat Gratz 334-262-8245

<p>This quarterly publication is being offered to you free of charge. You may share this newsletter with others as long as it is distributed in its entirety. If you prefer not to receive a copy, either call 256-551-4479 or send an email to <a href="mailto:moncierj@uasomh.uab.edu">moncierj@uasomh.uab.edu</a>. Use these same methods to request additional copies of <i>Performance Enhancement News</i>, to request an electronic version, or to be placed on the mailing list. Back issues of <i>Performance Enhancement News</i> can be found on the web at: <a href="http://www.monciersportpsychology.com">www.monciersportpsychology.com</a>.</p>	<p><b>Dr. Jim Moncier</b> is a licensed psychologist in Alabama and Florida. He is an assistant professor of Psychiatry and Family Medicine at the University of Alabama School of Medicine, Huntsville Campus. He is a Certified Consultant of the Association for Applied Sport Psychology and is a member of Division 47 (Exercise and Sport Psychology) of the American Psychological Association. His sport psychology practice includes work with athletes, coaches, and teams in junior high, high school, and collegiate sports</p>	<p>such as basketball, cheerleading, football, golf, soccer, softball, swimming, tennis, track, volleyball, and wrestling.</p> <p>To schedule a sport psychology consultation with Dr. Moncier, call 256-551-4479. Questions regarding sport psychology services can be directed to Dr. Moncier via email at <a href="mailto:moncierj@uasomh.uab.edu">moncierj@uasomh.uab.edu</a>. Further information about either sport psychology in general or Dr. Moncier's practice in particular can be found at: <a href="http://www.monciersportpsychology.com">www.monciersportpsychology.com</a>.</p>
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