Head Coaching

The WIN Method

Your Guide to Optimal Performance

Sharon Drake Petro, Ph.D.D.
The WIN Method: Your Guide to Optimal Performance

Equip yourself with the mental skills and strategies necessary for optimizing your performance on and off the field

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Yogi Berra once said, “Ninety percent of the game is half mental.” Whether you agree with Yogi’s math or not, I think you would agree that much of competitive sport is a mental game. That being the case, how much time do you devote to mental training?

Athletes know that mental toughness is critical to achieving peak performance. We often attribute a less-than-expected performance to a mental let down, i.e., “I really choked today” or “I had no confidence in my putting.” Yet, rarely do we see time devoted to mental skills preparation as part of a comprehensive training routine. Why is that? Too often it is assumed that when it comes to mental strength, an athlete either has it or does not. **The truth is mental skills, like physical skills, can be learned and improved through teaching and practice.** In the words of Chris Evert, professional tennis player, “Competitive toughness is an acquired skill and not an inherited gift.” These acquired mental skills are important for you to become more confident, focused and self-reliant during competition. In this article I will share with you the **five key principles** in my system, **The WIN Method**, that will allow you to shift your mindset to reach your optimal performance.

**The WIN Method: Your Guide to Optimal Performance**

**The WIN Method** is a set of principles created to help you enhance your focus on relevant, controllable elements for optimized performance. You become mentally tough when you are able to shift attention from distractions to performance-relevant cues. The “What’s Important Now?” question is the most effective tool to help you regain and maintain focus on pertinent cues. This question invites you to consider where your thoughts are leading you and make the **choice** to attend to only those that are relevant to your performance. The five principles mentioned earlier identify key areas that are critical to your performance.

**What’s Important Now? Should You Focus On:**

1. Your strengths or weaknesses
2. What you can control or cannot control
3. The past, present, or future
4. What you want to do or what you don’t want to do
5. Asking better questions or simply the first one that comes to mind
Focus, in the athletic context, can be defined as the ability to attend to the relevant cues in the environment and to maintain that attention for the duration of the contest. When you find yourself not being able to focus, you are attending to cues that are not relevant to your performance; you are mentally distracted. Tim Gallwey in *The Inner Game of Tennis* notes, “The focused mind only picks up on those aspects of a situation that are needed to accomplish the task at hand. It is not distracted by other thoughts or external events, it is totally engrossed in whatever is relevant in the here and now.”

**WIN Principle #1. Strengths or Weaknesses**

Competitive athletes are often perfectionists who are much harder on themselves than their worst opponents would ever be. Does this sound familiar? If so, my hunch is you find yourself focusing more on your weaknesses in order to correct them to enhance performance. Of course, it is important to identify areas in your performance that need improvement; and it is equally, if not more, important to identify and trust your strengths. I’m not endorsing that you ignore your weak areas; instead, I’m suggesting that the time to address those weaknesses is key. You’ve undoubtedly heard the saying, “There is a time and a place for everything.” This adage is especially true in competitive sport. For example, during the competitive season, if you practice Monday through Friday and compete on Saturday, the beginning of the week should be dedicated to improving weaknesses. The end of the week, however, should emphasize your strengths. Focusing on your strengths close to competition will help you develop trust in your abilities rather than being distracted by your disabilities. After the competition, you can then return to attending to areas that need improvement. I think you’ll find that by using this strategy you will be at peak performance—emotionally, mentally and physically—when it counts.

Another tendency associated with perfectionistic thinking is the attention to mistakes made during the contest and continually replaying them afterward. Unfortunately, while attending to mistakes, successful performances are disregarded; it is almost as if nothing less than success is expected and so when great performances are created, they are not celebrated. Instead, the attention is placed on the mistakes and—out of sheer habit and repetition—failure is what sticks in your memory. That can be dangerous because your most vivid—and long lasting—memories are associated with some type
of strong emotion. If successes aren’t recognized, but failures are, then the failures become the experiences that make a lasting impression. It is difficult to build your confidence if all you remember are your mistakes.

Instead, link strong positive emotions to your successes; take a moment after a great execution to let it sink in and feel really good about it—do not let it pass by unnoticed. And, take the same care to let your mistakes occur without fanfare. Practice imprinting the successes, not the mistakes, so that you can draw on positive associations during critical moments in competition.

**WIN Principle #2. What You Can Control or What You Can’t Control**

If you were to list what is within your control and what is outside of your control during competition, you would probably conclude that internal factors such as effort, thinking and performing are more controllable than external factors like the environment, opponents, coaches, family and friends. Yet, you may notice that when you are not performing well you are thinking about the external, uncontrollable factors. With so much of your energy focused elsewhere, it is no wonder that you cannot attend to the cues necessary for peak performance. Most athletes have “favorite” uncontrollable distractions that often get in their way. For some it is what others are thinking about their performance. It may be family, friends, teammates, coaches, or judges. Others may be distracted by their opponent’s reputation, officials’ calls, or playing conditions.

I worked with a soccer athlete who came to me with a great deal of frustration regarding his performance in competition. “I’ve tried everything. I’m doing everything I’m supposed to do. When I’m playing in a game, I focus on winning.” That was the problem. One concept that sometimes causes confusion when athletes are determining controllable and uncontrollable factors is winning. Since winning a competition has as much to do with the opponent as it does with you, it must go in the uncontrollable list. You can have an influence on the outcome, but you can’t control it. You could perform at your best and still lose the contest. In the heat of the battle, focusing on winning is a distraction. It takes you out of the present moment and sends you into the future. A
better strategy is to commit to **giving your best effort** throughout the competition and attend to
what you can control, your own behavior.

Ask yourself what might be a common distraction for you. Remind yourself that it has nothing to do
with your performance, and continued attention on the distraction will contribute to a less than
optimal performance. When that happens, and it will, use the WIN question to refocus your
attention on important and relevant cues. I believe that it is close to impossible to keep distracting
thoughts from entering your awareness, but you can decide how long you choose to keep them.

**WIN Principle #3. The Past, Present, or Future**

The past and the future can haunt you and impair your performance; in fact, one of the greatest
mistakes is allowing your thinking to linger in the past or gravitate toward the future. You have no
control over the past because you can’t change it. You can learn from your past successes and
mistakes, but the competitive environment generally leaves little time for extensive inventories. The
“now” in “What’s important now?” is most important in helping you let go of the past and quickly
**refocus on the present** for optimal performance.

Then there are the “what ifs” coaxing you to venture into the future: “What if I miss this shot? I’ll
let the team down. What’s everyone going to think? I’m always choking. I’m not sure this is worth
it. Might as well give it up!” It is amazing how quickly you can descend down this slippery slope
—so fast that we generally are unaware that it is happening. The awareness of how destructive this
futuristic self-talk is and the importance of stopping it as quickly as possible is critical. The key is to
attend to the process and stay in the present moment rather than the outcome, a future and
uncontrollable situation.

**WIN Principle #4. What You Want To Do or What You Don’t Want To Do**

When someone says, “Don’t think of a pink elephant,” what is the first image your mind captures?
More than likely, it is a pink elephant. When the mind has been given a negative command, it
ignores the “don’t” part of the statement and jumps right to the “pink elephant” part. What we can
learn from this is that your mind responds better to positive direction—to cues that guide your thinking toward desirable behavior instead of what you don’t want to happen. Telling yourself to “Attend to the type and placement of your serve” is far more effective than telling yourself “Don’t double fault.” Pay close attention to your language to ensure that you are telling yourself specifically what you want to do rather than instructing with “don’ts.” Your brain wants to help you so give it the information to do its job.

**WIN Principle #5. Asking Better Questions or The First One That Comes to Mind**

We’ve been discussing how your thoughts affect your performance thus far. The reality is that questions precede those thoughts. Often you aren't even aware of the questions you ask yourself, just the answers you get. Yet questions that you ask are quite powerful. They have the ability to direct or redirect your thoughts. Learning to ask better questions will allow you to focus on what is relevant to your performance rather than attending to distractions. Just by asking "What am I good at?" you are redirected from focusing on your weaknesses. Rather than ask, "Why can't I . . .?" you would be better able to problem solve to attain your goal with, "How can I . . .?" Instead of "What if . . .?" which generally takes you into the future with a less than optimal outcome, try "What's important now?" to bring you back to the present. **A better question is one that encourages an answer that leads to positive action.** I’m suggesting that if you ask better questions, you will get better answers; and, as a result, have better outcomes.

**Refocus: Replace With a Better Thought**

You have now learned the five principles of The WIN Method identifying the areas of focus that are relevant to your performance:

- Your strengths
- What you can control
- The present
- What you want
- Asking better questions
It is difficult to stop distracting thoughts altogether from entering your awareness. What is important is how long you allow those thoughts to stay with you. You become **mentally tough** when you are able to **shift attention from distracting thoughts to performance-relevant cues**.

It’s important to recognize that your mind remains quite active. Just telling yourself to stop thinking of distractions is not enough. If a better thought is not introduced, destructive thought patterns will soon be back. So, in correcting ineffective self-talk, you must not only stop the thoughts, but also replace them with more productive ones. I suggest the **traffic signal** as a metaphor to help you **refocus**. Red, stop the distracting thought. Yellow, ask a better question. Green, go with the better answer. When you become more aware of your self-talk and use the five principles of **The WIN Method**, you will be able to know the difference between relevant vs. distracting thoughts.

**Practice, Practice, Practice**

As with every new skill, practice is the key to mastery. I hope you now have a better understanding of how attention to mental skills training can have a powerful impact on your performance. Like physical skills, your thought processes must be attended to in each practice session in order to be readily available to you in competition. Armed with these skills and strategies, you will have a significant advantage. You will be amazed how quickly **The WIN Method** will help you improve your performance under pressure. Try it out and see how you play with purpose, confidence, and a renewed joy for your sport.

If you’ve found this report useful and would like to explore how to put **The WIN Method** to work for you, I invite you to schedule a **FREE “Discover Your Winner Within”** consultation to learn more about your needs and how Head Coaching can help you at **sharon@head-coaching.com**.

**In this free session you will:**

- Create a sense of clarity about the performance you really want to have
- Find out the essential building blocks for having the performance of your dreams
- Discover the #1 thing stopping you from performing the way you want
- Identify the most powerful actions that will move you towards the performance you desire
- Complete the session with the excitement of knowing EXACTLY what to do next to create the performance you truly want
Sharon Drake Petro, Ph.D.
*Peak Performance Coach and Speaker*

Sharon Petro is on a mission to help successful business professionals who take their sports seriously develop a champion mindset so they can consistently achieve their very best. As Founder and Director of Head Coaching she has guided a diverse group of athletes, coaches, and business professionals toward optimal performance.

Dr. Petro created Head Coaching in 1998 to help athletes learn and apply the mental skills needed to reach their potential. Her clients understand that more effective thinking directly relates to better performance, and they learn to control their thinking in ways that increase confidence.

As a former athlete and coach competing in individual and team sports, Dr. Petro understands first-hand the pressures of competitive sport. In her 17-year career as a high school and collegiate coach, she achieved success at both the state and national level. She has coached women’s basketball and women’s tennis at the University of Notre Dame and was awarded the NCAA Division II Wilson Intercollegiate Tennis Coach of the Year in 1985. Dr. Petro chaired the Department of Physical Education and served as an Assistant Athletic Director at Notre Dame. In 2007, she was inducted into the Notre Dame Monogram Club as an Honorary Member.

Realizing that her passion is teaching and coaching, Dr. Petro moved on to the University of Virginia earning her doctorate in Applied Sport Psychology. She received her training as a Professional Counselor at UVA’s Curry School of Education, served on the faculty of the UVA Counseling Center, taught Sport Psychology at both the Curry School and at American University. Additionally, she holds an M.S. and B.S. degrees in Health and Physical Education as well as an M.S. degree in Administration. Dr. Petro is the creator of *The WIN Method: Your Guide to Optimal Performance* and is the author of *The Tennis Drill Book.*