

Set Yourself Up For Success –In Practice

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You have heard the phrase “there are no guarantees in life”. Maybe you have heard this when looking for some assurance that the used car you just bought will not break down, that you will do well on an exam, or that your flight will be on time so you can make your connecting flight. While we plan for the best, it is true that there are no guarantees. The same holds true in sport. Athletic success is far too complex and multifaceted for someone to be able to guarantee success by following a simple set of guidelines. There is always a chance that things will not work out the way you would like them to.

With that said, do not lose hope. Fortunately, there are things you can do to set yourself up for success and increase your probability of success. In this article, we are going to discuss how to set the stage for success in practice. (A follow-up article in the next NSCA’s Performance Training Journal will address strategies you can use to increase the probability of success in competition.) While we will obviously focus on the mental aspects of training, bear in mind that “setting yourself up for success” also involves controlling other aspects of performance such as physical training, technical training, and nutrition, to name a few.

What is success in practice?

In competition, success is about achieving your goal. Success may be winning the race, setting a personal record, or executing a specific task correctly. If you are like most athletes, you know exactly what you want to accomplish in competition, and you see success as achieving that goal. Practice should be no different. Success in practice is about achieving practice goals. If you do not set goals for each practice, you are not alone, but need to recognize that daily goal setting is a necessary first step towards setting yourself up for success in practice. You should have a goal for every practice something you want to accomplish. Even on those days when you wish you were anywhere but in practice, it is important to be able to take something, however little it may be, away from your training. As a first step, before every practice session, ask yourself (and answer) the question “what am I going to work on today to make myself better?” The answer to this question, whether it is doing 30 minutes of cardio, working on specific elements of technique, or maintaining a positive attitude, is your goal. Achievement of this goal helps set the stage for practice success.

Analyze Your Past

Whether you realize it or not, you know better than anyone else what does and does not work in regard to having quality practice success. Take a minute to identify strategies that seem to have produced successful practices for you in the past. Identify two to three things you have found through experience that you need to do to get the most out of a given practice session. In doing so, reflect on your tendencies. For many athletes, a pattern often exists in terms of factors that have the greatest influence on success. For some, it may be having the right energy level, whereas for others going in with a positive attitude has a critical influence on practice. What tends to get in your way when you have a poor practice? What tends to help performance?

If you are unable to identify any trends, start the process of figuring it out now. Keep a practice journal and log information about your practices that you think could influence your performance and help (or hinder) you reach your practice goals. How were you feeling during the practice? What were you thinking about? What did you eat and drink before and during the practice? Did you have an argument with your boyfriend or girlfriend? How was your sleep? Start

logging this stuff now and when you look back over your records in a month you will see the trends start to emerge.

Keep Baggage in Your Locker

It is important to realize that you are more than just an athlete. You may be a student, a husband or wife, a brother or sister, a friend, or simply a person going through the ups and downs of life. This means you have things going on in your life besides your sport. You are undoubtedly well aware of this as you struggle to balance the various stresses and responsibilities in your life and still get something out of your training. But how many times do negative thoughts from other areas of your life encroach on your practice? You can set yourself up for practice success by leaving these distracting thoughts away from the practice environment. Instead, keep this “baggage” in your locker to be picked up after practice. As you are putting on your practice uniform or workout gear, imagine you are putting on armor that blocks all these negative thoughts and allow you to focus on the task at hand. Only when you take off the armor at the end of the practice will your mind be allowed to once again dwell on the distractions from off the practice field. During practice, commit to physically and mentally being an athlete and only an athlete.

Control What You Say to Yourself

“You are the worst; I can’t believe you missed that lift.”

“Let it go. Focus on your breathing.”

In reading these two self-talk statements, you surely know which one is more beneficial to your performance versus which would be more damaging. Being overly negative, critical or unrealistically demanding can have a huge impact on your practice performance. To set yourself up for success in practice, it is important to monitor and control what you say to yourself. To do so, first become aware of how you tend to talk to yourself. Then, commit to “being your own best friend”. That is, talk to yourself about what you can do and will do instead of what you cannot do or did incorrectly.

Practice, practice, and practice some more, after all perfect practice makes perfect competition. As an athlete, you spend an inordinate amount of time in training, so make sure this perfect practice extends to your mental preparation and goal setting. Make the most of this time by taking steps to set yourself up for practice success.

About the Author

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