



# THINK LIKE AN ATHLETE

For the world's top athletes, focus is their secret weapon, and now you can steal their secrets. Far from your average new-year motivation article, we called on some of the top experts in sports psychology to help you master your mindset like the pros.

WRITTEN BY KATELYN SWALLOW

**When it comes to making serious changes to your health and fitness, pumping iron and chugging protein shakes is only half the battle.**

The real struggle is sticking to those 5 a.m. training sessions, pushing through the pain of a heavy lift, and continuing on the path to bettering yourself for the full 365. And after a year that has caused many of us to put our regular fitness routine on pause, staying motivated in 2021 comes down to strengthening your mind as much as your body—maybe even more. Whether you've simply lost your training momentum or are starting completely from scratch, adopting the mindset tricks of professional athletes might be the secret to getting back on track, staying consistent, and smashing your old PBs—quickly.

“Mindset is your mental attitude that determines how you interpret and respond to situations, while motivation refers to the desire and drive you have to perform an action or behavior,” explains founder of Omnipych Clinical Psychology Services, Dr. Lillian Nejad. “Essentially, your mindset determines how motivated you are to perform particular behaviors. And if you perform behaviors consistently enough, they become a habit, which are automatic behaviors that form part of your regular routine.”

In other words, develop the right mindset first, and the motivation and habits you need will follow. One study in the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* found that a positive mindset and mental toughness are characteristics that nearly every successful athlete embodies. Having trust in the process, the ability to manage stressful situations, focus, self-belief, and the desire to win were also right up there.

So how can you develop the mindset of a champion? By learning from the coaches who coach them. We've called on some top sports psychologists and motivational mentors to teach you the real-world tactics of the elite athlete.

## Take Stock of Your Success

For Dr. Nejad, the first step to a positive performance mindset is to determine your “why.” What is the reason for doing what you do, and why is it meaningful to you? Identifying your purpose will be the catalyst for staying motivated. “Athletes need to believe that what they are undertaking is worth the pain, struggle, and pressure,” she says. “The meaning



### Get to know yourself by asking:

- 1 Why are you in this situation?
- 2 Is this the path you want to take?
- 3 Is this an expression of your values?
- 4 Are you passionate about what you are doing?

that athletes attach to what they do has a major impact on how they approach it, and can ultimately be the difference between failure and success.”

Next, perform an assessment of your training and nutrition history and make note of what worked, and what didn't. “It is important for athletes to reflect on their past experiences and their own personal preferences and characteristics,” says Dr. Nejad. “This will highlight the tools, skills, and conditions that lead to effective training, and ultimately, put you in the best position to achieve your goals.”

When you better understand your goals and what you need to be successful, you can put those conditions (with improvements) in place, prepare your mind, and set yourself up to achieve your goals.

## Focus on the Present

People often don't meet their all-important goals because their mind is racing ahead to the result. It's why you stress about getting back to your personal best deadlift, and then sleep through your morning workout because it seems too far out of reach.

The solution? Mindfulness, or moving your thoughts to the present. “You can't change anything about your mindset, motivation, or habits unless you pay attention to what is going on,” explains psychology consultant and author of *The Elite: Think Like an Athlete Succeed Like a Champion*, Dr. Joann Lukins. “Mindfulness, paying attention, concentration—call it whatever you like, but it is undoubtedly the foundation for a performance mindset and implementing small, ‘do-able’ changes that will move you

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**Think back to when you were at your strongest, fittest, and happiest, and then ask yourself:**

- ❓ What were the conditions, both internally (in your own mind and body) and externally (in the environment), when you were successful and when you were not?
- ❓ What were the thoughts, foods, workout times, and support networks you had around you?
- ❓ What motivated you? Perhaps you were going to the gym with a friend, tracking your food to hit particular macro targets, or rewarding yourself after completing a mini-goal, such as buying yourself a new pair of kicks.
- ❓ What helped you focus? Be it journaling, visualization or mindfulness techniques.



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towards your goal. Notice your thoughts and your actions.”

If you're still feeling too distracted by the end result to focus on the task at hand, think, “What's important right now?” and write down the action steps. By focusing on what you can control, it makes you feel more certain and confident in your lifts and workouts. It also simplifies your major goal and makes it less daunting—be it running a marathon or hitting a big deadlift. Mental performance consultant for Journey 2 Elite, LLC and Former Division I basketball athlete, Marché Amerson offers this example scenario: “When attempting a lift you've never tried before, take notice of your emotional and physical state, shift your focus to the task at hand, believe in yourself, and go for it.” (For more advice from Amerson, see page 55.)

**Ditch 24/7 Positivity**

Positive self-talk is spouted in self-help books, but Dr. Lukins says remaining consistently upbeat is unrealistic and not necessarily productive. Instead of forcing

things to be puppies and rainbows, athletes concentrate on talking to themselves in a way that is more helpful. “For example, when a global pandemic comes along and cancels your favorite swimming event, I don't expect you to say, ‘That's great, I'm so glad that's happened.’ Positivity won't resonate in this instance,” she says.

Instead, reframe your thoughts around the setback by focusing on the potential for growth or self improvement. She says, a more helpful way to approach the previous example would be to say, “That's disappointing, but here is my opportunity to go back to some of the functionality of my swim stroke, improve that, and be better for it when events do open back up.”

An effective positive self-talk tool is having a mantra: A statement, slogan, or word that your mind plays on rhythmic repeat when you're faced with a difficult task, you're overcome with fear, or your motivation goes AWOL. Mantras are designed to focus your attention toward the end goal, and block out negative self-talk and distractions, such as pain.

**“Athletes need to believe that what they are undertaking is worth the pain, struggle, and pressure.”**

While research on the benefits of mantras is still in its infancy, a recent review by scientists from the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland found that mantra meditation can help reduce stress, anxiety, and physiological distress—feelings that are pretty prominent halfway through a tough workout, especially after some time away from the gym. “The key with a mantra is to find something that will resonate for you,” says Dr. Lukins, who divides mantras into two types: Task-specific or motivational. “An example of a task-specific mantra would be, ‘One more step, one more step’ or ‘Eye on the ball, eye

on the ball.’ A motivational mantra would be, ‘This will stop hurting as soon as I cross the line’ or ‘Keep going.’”

As for Dr. Lukins's go-to mantra when she's hitting the wall? “This is the point,” is the phrase she repeats to keep going. “I didn't get up at 4:30 a.m. to train and have a lovely time—I could have done that at 7 a.m.!” she says. “Repeating ‘This is the point!’ in my head reminds me that the pain is one I chose, helping me to push through.”

**See It Before It Happens**

Mentally rehearsing your workout the night before can actually train your mind and body to cope—without having to lift a finger. When you make this visualization as vivid as possible, the brain interprets those mental images as if you were actually doing them, a study published in the journal *Behavioural and*

*Brain Sciences* discovered.

“As the team therapist for the Philadelphia Flyers, I showed the players that by visualizing themselves blocking a shot, their muscles are contracting just as if they were doing it on the ice,” says psychotherapist and behavioral specialist, Dr. Steven Rosenberg.

Go through the motions of successfully hitting your next big lift the night before your workout. Think about how the weight would feel on your back, how your muscles would strain and move, and the sound of your fellow gym-goers as they pound the treadmill next to you.

“The more realistic you can make your visualizations, the more effective the skill will be. Try to incorporate the five senses: Sight, touch, taste, sound, smell. This is especially useful if you're injured, because it allows you to simulate performance-

related movements without placing any tension to the injured area,” says Amerson. “Someone who has recently started working with a personal trainer and wants to learn to weight train on their own may visualize the proper lift mechanics before attempting the actual lift.”

**A Final Word Before 2021**

Like every New Year's resolution or “I'll start on Monday” health revamp, the expert advice on creating a killer mindset is clear: Start small and don't try to change everything at once. “Start with one action, get it underway, be kind to yourself when it doesn't happen or work, and then persevere,” says Dr. Lukins. Educate yourself by reading widely and ensure you have plenty of support, be it joining a Facebook support group or finding a training buddy with similar goals.



**Inside Her Mind**

**»» Marché Amerson**

Mental performance consultant Marché Amerson finds it easy to relate to the professional athletes she helps each day, because once upon a time, she was one. The former Division I basketball player for the University of Tennessee has also completed a master's in Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior. She's uniquely qualified for knowing what it takes to commit to training and overcome physical challenges day in, day out.

Here are her top tips for getting your head in the game that is 2021:

**1. Know Your “Why”**

I pushed through on the days that I didn't want to practice because I knew my parents had sacrificed so much of their time and money to give me the opportunity to obtain a scholarship. When you have a reason for why you do what you do, you always have a reason to keep going.

**2. Treat Yourself with Kindness**

What you tell yourself matters! Expecting greatness from negative, doubtful thoughts will never give you the results you desire. You are capable of what you set your mind to. If you believe it, you can achieve it.

**3. Reward Yourself**

As athletes, we are conditioned to look for flaws in our game, and we work tirelessly to improve them. Not often enough do we celebrate our strengths and progress. When you've had a great game, practice, or workout, reward yourself with a nap or down-time activity to recharge. This will keep you feeling refreshed and establish a sense of pride in your accomplishments.

**4. Establish a Support System**

I was fortunate to have a father who played college football, so he could relate to some of the struggles I faced. However, it isn't uncommon to have friends or family members who just don't understand the demand of your goals. Having an open and honest conversation with them about how they can support you on your journey may help you to stay committed to your training.

**5. Be Present**

Leave the last game or mistake in the past. I've spent hours in the gym shooting the week of a big competition and then missed my first five shots of the game. When I chose to focus on the misses, my performance declined across the board. When I moved on with the game, I gave myself the opportunity to make a play that my team needed because I was present and alert to all the other ways I could have a positive impact. Always focus on the here and now! **S**