MENTAL PERFORMANCE WORKBOOK

A Practical Field Guide for Competitive Athletes

About This Workbook

This workbook translates decades of sports psychology research into practical, game-ready tools. Each section targets a specific mental skill, offers evidence-based context, includes a completed example so you can see the tool in action, and provides blank write-in space for your personal work.

Work through each section with your coach or sport psychologist. Return to exercises before big competitions, after setbacks, or any time you want to sharpen your edge.

Name: _____

Sport / Position: _____

Season / Year: _____

Coach / Consultant: _____

School / Club: _____

This material is for personal development use. Research citations are provided throughout for your reference. Consult a licensed sport psychologist for clinical guidance.

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HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

1. Read the Evidence Note at the start of each section to understand why the skill matters.
2. Study the completed Example to see how a real athlete applied it.
3. Complete your own write-in exercises honestly -- there are no wrong answers.
4. Revisit your entries weekly and update as you grow.

Section 1: Goal Setting & Motivation

EVIDENCE NOTE

Locke & Latham's (2002) goal-setting theory -- one of the most replicated findings in performance science -- shows that specific, challenging goals paired with feedback lead to significantly higher performance than vague 'do your best' goals. In sport, process goals (actions under your control) reduce anxiety and sustain motivation better than outcome goals alone (Kingston & Hardy, 1997). Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) further distinguishes autonomous motivation (intrinsic, values-driven) from controlled motivation (external pressure), with autonomous motivation linked to greater persistence and well-being.

1.1 Three-Level Goal Framework

Effective athletes set goals at three levels simultaneously: Outcome goals give direction, performance goals set measurable benchmarks, and process goals drive daily behaviour. The process layer is where championship habits are built -- and it is the only level you fully control on competition day.

EXAMPLE | Alex M. -- College Soccer Goalkeeper

Outcome Goal: Win the starting position for every conference match and earn All-Conference GK.

Performance Goal: Reduce my goals-against average from 1.4 to below 1.0 by the conference tournament.

Process Goals:

1. Complete 200 distribution reps (goal kicks + throws) every training session.
2. Review video of the next opponent's forward runs with the coach every Thursday.
3. Complete 15 minutes of footwork and reaction drills before every training session without skipping.

My OUTCOME Goal (what result do I want by season's end?):

My PERFORMANCE Goal (measurable benchmark at mid-season?):

My PROCESS Goal #1 (daily/weekly action fully in my control):

My PROCESS Goal #2:

My PROCESS Goal #3:

1.2 Motivation Check-In

Athletes with strong autonomous motivation -- driven by genuine love of the sport and personal values -- show greater resilience, better well-being, and longer sport commitment than those driven purely by external reward or pressure (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Use the prompts below to reconnect with your deeper 'why' and assess where your motivation stands right now.

Why does this sport genuinely matter to me -- beyond trophies or anyone's approval?

Right now, how motivated am I toward my process goals?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

1 = Not at all motivated *10 = Fully committed*

What one thing would move my motivation score one point higher?

Section 2: Confidence & Self-Talk

EVIDENCE NOTE

Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory identifies four sources of sport confidence: mastery experiences (past successes), vicarious experiences (watching similar others succeed), verbal persuasion (encouragement from credible sources), and physiological states (interpreting pre-competition arousal as excitement rather than threat). Meta-analyses of self-talk research (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2011, N = 193 studies) confirm that instructional and motivational self-talk reliably improve performance, with the strongest effects for fine-motor and novel tasks.

2.1 Confidence Evidence Log

When confidence drops, the brain enters a negativity-filtering mode -- scanning for evidence of weakness and ignoring evidence of strength. The antidote is deliberate, specific evidence collection. Write three concrete pieces of evidence that you are capable and prepared. Be factual -- not vague. Revisit this log before every competition.

EXAMPLE | Alex M. -- College Soccer Goalkeeper

Evidence #1: Made a penalty save in the 89th minute last Tuesday that kept us level -- the team went on to win in overtime. That save was mine.

Evidence #2: My coach told me after the match that my communication and defensive line organisation was the best he has seen from a goalkeeper at this level this season.

Evidence #3: I stayed 40 minutes after every training session for three weeks working on my weak-side diving. I can feel the improvement -- and no one made me do it.

Evidence #1 -- A specific recent performance I am proud of:

Evidence #2 -- Positive feedback or recognition I have received:

Evidence #3 -- A moment I showed mental toughness, discipline, or work ethic:

2.2 Self-Talk Reframe Practice

Negative self-talk is rarely completely wrong -- it often contains a grain of truth. The goal is not to replace it with empty positivity, but to build a truthful, actionable alternative that redirects your attention toward what you can control and execute right now.

EXAMPLE | Alex M. -- College Soccer Goalkeeper

Negative thought: 'I let that near-post shot in -- they are going to keep targeting that side all game and I cannot stop it.'

Why it's unhelpful: It is past-focused, predicts failure, and pulls attention away from the next moment.

Truthful reframe: 'Near post is set. Reset my angle, communicate the shape to my defenders, and be ready -- the next shot is mine.'

2-word cue: 'Set. Ready.'

My recurring negative thought during competition (write it exactly as it sounds):

Why is it unhelpful? What does it focus on that I cannot control?

My truthful, actionable reframe:

My 2-word competition cue (distilled version of the reframe):

How confident do I feel entering my next competition?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

1 = Very low confidence *10 = Extremely confident*

Section 3: Attention & Focus Control

EVIDENCE NOTE

Nideffer's (1976) TAIS model identifies four attentional styles that athletes move between during competition: Broad-External (reading the whole field or situation), Narrow-External (locking onto a specific target), Broad-Internal (strategic thinking and planning), and Narrow-Internal (monitoring body sensations and technique). Elite performance requires flexible, rapid switching between these modes on demand. Moran (2012) found that athletes who actively practice attention switching -- rather than attempting to suppress distractions -- perform more consistently under pressure.

3.1 Attentional Demand Mapping

Different moments in your sport require different attentional modes. By mapping these demands explicitly, you can practise the correct switch in training so it becomes automatic under pressure.

EXAMPLE | Alex M. -- College Soccer Goalkeeper

Broad-External: Scanning the entire field as the opposition builds out -- reading the striker's run patterns, the winger's positioning, and where pressure is about to come from before the ball enters the final third.

Narrow-External: Tracking the ball from the moment a shot is struck -- eyes locked on the ball through the shooter's body, ignoring everything in peripheral vision until the save is made or caught.

Broad-Internal: During a goal kick or dead ball -- mentally reviewing the defensive shape, deciding which distribution option creates the best transition, and setting the defensive line height.

Narrow-Internal: After conceding a goal -- standing with hands on knees, checking jaw tension and shoulder position, controlling breathing rhythm, and resetting posture before stepping up to retrieve the ball for the restart.

Broad-External focus is required when:

Narrow-External focus is required when:

Broad-Internal focus is required when:

Narrow-Internal focus is required when:

3.2 Distraction Audit & Refocus Plan

List your three most common competition distractions, then assign a specific refocus action for each. A refocus action is a concrete physical or verbal cue -- not a wish or a vague intention. It is something you can execute in 2-3 seconds.

EXAMPLE | Alex M. -- College Soccer Goalkeeper

Distraction #1: The crowd erupting after a big save -- I start soaking it in and lose track of where the ball is going next. Refocus Action: Clap hands once, call out my defensive shape ('line up!'), shift eyes immediately to the ball and the restart position.

Distraction #2: A defender error that leads to a goal -- I feel frustration rising and start mentally replaying the mistake. Refocus Action: Walk to the post, place one hand on it, exhale for 4 counts, say 'next ball' internally, and face the field ready.

Distraction #3: An opposing striker trying to get in my head during set pieces.

Refocus Action: Don't respond, don't make eye contact -- bounce on my toes twice to re-engage my body, lock eyes on the ball at the corner spot, not the striker.

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Distraction #1:

Refocus Action #1:

Distraction #2:

Refocus Action #2:

Distraction #3:

Refocus Action #3:

3.3 Focus Word Bank

Build a personal vocabulary of 5-8 single words that immediately anchor your attention to the present moment and your task. These become your in-game language -- short, automatic, and personally meaningful.

My Focus Word Bank (list 5-8 words below):

Section 4: Arousal Regulation & Breathing

EVIDENCE NOTE

The Yerkes-Dodson inverted-U model predicts that both under-arousal and over-arousal impair performance -- each athlete has an individualized optimal zone. Diaphragmatic breathing with extended exhalation activates the parasympathetic nervous system, reducing heart rate variability and cortisol levels within seconds (Zaccaro et al., 2018). Conversely, short explosive breaths and power movements reliably increase physiological activation. Hanin's (1997) IZOF model demonstrates that optimal arousal is athlete-specific -- not universally 'moderate' -- and must be individually identified and deliberately recreated.

4.1 Identify Your Optimal Zone

Your Individualised Zone of Optimal Functioning (IZOF) is the specific combination of physical sensations and mental states that corresponds to your best performances. Documenting it in concrete terms gives you a target state to aim for and recreate.

EXAMPLE | Alex M. -- College Soccer Goalkeeper

Physical when performing best: Loose hands, relaxed shoulders, weight slightly forward on my toes, breathing feels easy and automatic -- I am not thinking about my feet, just reading the game in front of me.

Mental state: Calm authority. Commanding my box without tension. Communicating clearly and early. Not reactive --anticipating. I feel like everything in front of me slows down.

Optimal arousal number: 6 out of 10 -- composed and sharp, not hyped or frantic.

Physical feelings in my body when I perform at my best:

Mental and emotional state when I perform at my best:

My optimal arousal level on competition day:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

1 = Flat/calm *10 = Very high energy*

What does over-arousal feel like for me, and what is my first physical sign I have gone too high?

4.2 Regulation Toolkit

Select at least one technique from each category below. Practise your chosen technique daily for 2 weeks before trusting it under competition pressure.

DOWN-Regulation (to reduce over-arousal):

- 4-7-8 Breathing: Inhale 4 counts, hold 7, exhale 8 -- repeat 3 cycles.
- Box Breathing: Inhale 4, hold 4, exhale 4, hold 4 -- widely used by military and elite sport.

- Progressive Muscle Relaxation: Contract and release each muscle group from feet to face.
- Cold water on wrists or face -- fast physiological interrupt before competition.

UP-Regulation (to raise energy when flat or under-aroused):

- Power breathing: 3 sharp explosive inhale-exhale cycles followed by a deep power hold.
- Dynamic warm-up with high-tempo, personally curated music.
- Motivational self-talk combined with a physical power pose or movement.
- Vivid recall of a peak-performance highlight -- replay it for 30 seconds.

My chosen DOWN-regulation technique and when I will use it:

My chosen UP-regulation technique and when I will use it:

Section 5: Competition Reset Routine

EVIDENCE NOTE
A reset routine (also called a between-play or between-point routine) is a brief, pre-programmed behavioral sequence used after errors or high-stress moments to restore attentional focus and return to the optimal performance state. Lidor & Singer (2003) and Cotterill (2010) show that athletes who use consistent pre-performance routines demonstrate significantly lower performance variability under pressure than those without one. The routine does not suppress emotion -- it channels it, giving the nervous system a structured bridge back to readiness. Consistency of the routine matters more than its content.

5.1 Build Your Reset Routine

A competition-grade reset routine has three characteristics: (1) it is physically anchored -- a real action, not just a thought; (2) it takes 5-15 seconds; and (3) it is executable regardless of score, conditions, or how badly the last play went. Design yours using the three-phase structure below.

EXAMPLE | Alex M. -- College Soccer Goalkeeper (used immediately after conceding a goal)
RELEASE: Walk deliberately to retrieve the ball from the net -- steady pace, head up, no sprinting or hanging my head.
RESET: Hands on knees for one full breath -- check jaw is loose, shoulders are down, look up at the field not at the scoreboard.
REFOCUS: Set the ball, look at my defenders, call my shape out loud: 'Our shape. Let's go. Next one.' Step back to my position only when I feel ready.

RELEASE -- My physical action to discharge the emotion (e.g., step away, specific gesture, breath):

RESET -- My body-check action (e.g., shoulders back, jaw loose, one exhale):

REFOCUS -- My anchor cue word or short phrase that returns my attention to task:

When exactly in my sport will I use this routine? (Name 2-3 specific trigger moments)

Section 5.2 -- Reset Routine Practice Tracking

Track your reset routine usage across every practice session and competition. Mark each opportunity: U = Used it fully, P = Used it partially, F = Forgot or chose not to. Target: 80% or more 'U' marks in practice before trusting the routine under competition pressure. Use the Notes column to record what you observed about the routine's effect.

Date	Event / Practice	# Opportunities	U / P / F	Routine Felt...	Notes / Observations

COACH TIP

Review this table weekly with your athlete. Celebrate usage rate first -- then discuss quality. Ask: 'What made it easier or harder to use your routine?' not 'Why didn't you use it?' If the athlete scores below 60% U after two weeks, revisit the routine design -- it may be too long, too complex, or not well-suited to their sport's timing demands.

Section 6: Imagery & Mental Rehearsal

EVIDENCE NOTE

Mental imagery activates many of the same neural pathways as physical execution (Jeannerod, 1994), with fMRI studies confirming overlapping motor cortex activation during vivid first-person mental rehearsal. Meta-analyses (Driskell et al., 1994; Calmels et al., 2004) show imagery is most effective when: (a) combined with physical practice rather than used as a replacement; (b) performed in first-person (internal) perspective; (c) multi-sensory -- including kinesthetic feeling, not only visual detail; and (d) practised regularly. Brief pre-competition imagery (5 minutes) has been shown to increase performance confidence and reduce state anxiety significantly.

6.1 Imagery Script Builder

A high-quality imagery script is multi-sensory, emotionally accurate, and written in present tense. It includes the environment, physical sensations, execution of the skill, and the emotional experience of performing at your best. Use the structure below to build your personal script. Once written, record yourself reading it aloud (2-4 minutes) and replay the recording before sleep or during pre-competition preparation.

EXAMPLE | Alex M. -- College Soccer Goalkeeper

Environment: I am in the stadium 45 minutes before kickoff. I can smell the freshly cut grass and feel the cool morning air on my forearms. The goal frame is in front of me -- it feels familiar and completely mine.

Physical sensation: My gloves feel tight and grippy. My hands are already warm. Weight is centred and balanced -- loose everywhere, shoulders, jaw, legs. Nothing is forced.

Execution: A forward breaks through one-on-one on my right side. I do not backpedal -- I hold my line, stay big, read the body shape, and commit at exactly the right moment. I smother the ball with strong hands. Clean. No rebound. Done.

Emotion: Total presence. No fear, no crowd noise -- just me and the ball. I own this box and everything that comes into it.

Environment -- describe the sights, sounds, and smells of your performance setting:

Physical sensation -- how does your body feel at its very best?

Execution -- describe your key skill or sequence in specific, vivid detail:

Emotion -- what do you feel internally when performing at your peak?

6.2 Imagery Practice Log

Commit to 5 minutes of imagery daily for 3 weeks. Track each session below. Rate vividness 1-5 (1 =

foggy/disconnected, 5 = crystal clear and felt real). Note what made it vivid or what pulled you out.

Date	Duration (min)	Vividness 1-5	Perspective (1st / 3rd)	What I Noticed / What to Improve

Section 7: Resilience & Adversity Response

EVIDENCE NOTE

Resilience in sport is the capacity to adapt positively under significant challenge, not the absence of difficulty (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). Longitudinal research (Luthar et al., 2000) identifies five trainable resilience factors: positive emotions, cognitive reappraisal (reframing), a strong sense of personal meaning, social support, and self-regulation skills. Critically, exposure to manageable competition adversity followed by structured reflection builds adaptive capacity over time --meaning setbacks are training opportunities when processed correctly. Catastrophising and rumination are the two primary psychological mechanisms that derail competition resilience and must be actively interrupted.

7.1 Adversity Response Plan

Elite athletes do not improvise when adversity strikes -- they execute a pre-planned response that was designed when they were calm and thinking clearly. Use this framework to build your personal adversity response plan before your next competition.

EXAMPLE | Alex M. -- College Soccer Goalkeeper

Most likely adversity: Conceding a soft, savable goal in the first 20 minutes -- one I know I should have stopped. Honest first reaction: 'That was completely my fault. The whole team is going to lose confidence in me and the manager might pull me.'

Why that reaction is unhelpful: It catastrophises one moment, it is entirely past-focused, and it pulls my attention away from the 70+ minutes my team still needs me for.
Planned reframe: 'One mistake does not define this match. My team needs a goalkeeper right now, not someone who has gone missing mentally. Refocus, organize, stay in the game.'
Immediate physical action: Walk to the post, place one hand on it, one slow exhale, call out my defensive shape.
Recovery affirmation: 'I am still the best goalkeeper on this field. The next shot is mine.'

My most likely competition adversity:

My honest likely first emotional reaction:

Why that reaction is unhelpful (what does it focus on?):

My planned cognitive reframe:

My immediate physical action in that moment:

My recovery affirmation:

7.2 Post-Competition Resilience Review

Complete this review within 24 hours of any competition where adversity occurred. Honest reflection -- not harsh self-criticism -- is the goal. This is where growth lives.

EXAMPLE | Alex M. -- College Soccer Goalkeeper

What happened: I conceded from a corner -- I misjudged my starting position and the ball sailed over my head at the back post.

How I responded honestly: I was distracted for the next 10-15 minutes, mentally replaying the cross. My distribution became sloppy and my communication dropped off.

What I would do differently: Use my reset routine at the very next restart -- walk to the post, hand on the post, one exhale, call my shape, and focus only on the next ball.

What I did well that I want to repeat: I made two excellent reaction saves in the second half once I settled. The error did not end my match -- it only interrupted it. My communication and organization were strong from the 65th minute onward.

What adversity occurred?

How did I actually respond in the moment? (Be honest -- no judgment):

What would I do differently using my reset routine or reframe?

What did I handle well that I want to repeat or build on?

Overall resilience rating for this competition:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

1 = Really struggled to bounce back *10 = Managed adversity well*