



Sports Psychology and Jujitsu

by

Gary Prout

It can be a horrible feeling in a sporting contest. There you are - one on one - and you know that you are losing the battle. Just minutes previously you were very confident of the outcome being different. You were of the opinion that you had trained just as hard as your opponent. You had even seen them at club practice and other tournaments and thought you would be the likely victor in a contest. Your confidence is soon replaced by doubt. Where once an opponent's body position would be met by your automatic response based on countless hours of training, you start to second guess yourself and make a decision a fraction of a second late.... And bang!! You have lost.

“Research and experience have proven that structured scientific mental training can help us learn to prepare and use our mind to improve our competitive performance” Beale (2005). The impact that mental training can have on performance is well documented. All sports people have experienced the times (albeit infrequently) when everything went according to plan. Examples such as when every putt on the golf course was struck true, every move made by your opponent was easily anticipated, you took every half chance and made it a winner, time seemed to slow down allowing more time to read the play and respond accordingly. These are examples people commonly refer to as playing “in the zone”.

Dr Gary Sailes (2005) refers to the zone as “a state of consciousness where all of the body's senses and functions act in harmony with each other. When an athlete experiences this state of consciousness, the experience seems to flow. The senses absorb data and the subconscious analyses this and wills the body to perform.”

For the average athlete, regardless of their physical activity, getting into this “mental zone” is often a fluke and not predetermined. The sport of Jujitsu is definitely a sport where you need to react instinctively and quickly or end up on the receiving end of a well placed strike or thrown on your back. Therefore the need to be mentally alert is required. The intent of this discussion paper is to propose a method of allowing individuals a greater chance of entering the “zone” and as a result, perform at higher levels with greater consistency.

A method of achieving this mental state can be achieved through following a predetermined plan of attack. “To perform well is to adapt to constantly changing conditions and react to unforeseen circumstances. Any sense of consistency and familiarity of a routine is a huge advantage” (McGetrick, 1999). The following six steps will be proposed to achieve this:

- Tactical
- Equipment
- Physical
- Mental
- Technical
- Execute

Step 1. Tactical: or What is your plan of attack?

The first step is having a clear picture in your mind of knowing what you need to do. To successfully achieve this, a clear understanding of your own strengths and weaknesses will need to be ascertained. From here a general strategy working towards your strengths can be formulated. It is far better to concentrate on what you do well and force your opponent to follow your tactics or ways to make him or her follow your lead, than focus on how they will exploit your weaknesses.

It is therefore important to formulate “Plan A.” For example, when sparring, the goal may be to get your opponent to drop their hands & strike with kentsui (hammer fist). You would then perform a dummy high mawashi geri to the opponent’s upper torso (Image 1). When the opponent moves to block the kick with their hands, pull the kick & punch them with kentsui (Image 2).



Image 1



Image 2

Another plan which may be formulated for standing, may have the goal, to throw the opponent in seoi otoshi. You would step through to throw your opponent in o soto gari (Image 3). The opponent would then move their weight forward to counter being thrown. As they do this, quickly turn & drop to one knee throwing in seoi otoshi (Image 4).



Image 3



Image 4

As “Plan A” does not always work, a flexible approach is needed and alternative plans need to be considered to change your tactics if you find that your opponent has the edge. The ability to keep a clear head in these situations makes it easier to recognize what changes need to be made and when. Responses made in the heat of the battle may work (remember and use these for future reference). However, many a fight can be lost due to rash decision making.

How is this applied? Time is needed before a bout to have a plan of attack. Experience will determine how much time is needed. This can be as little as thirty seconds up to five minutes. Athletes have been known in the past to arrive at a bout lethargic due to being mentally tired through constantly reviewing tactics and possible scenarios in the bout.

Step 2. Equipment:

Before performing, care should be taken that all of your equipment such as clothing, guards and footwear are appropriate. It can be very disconcerting in the middle of a bout to find your belt has come undone or your glove flies off through the air after a spinning high kick (judges would not be impressed and neither would your opponent). During a bout, less time can be spent on this step. However if time permits, readjustment of attire can be one less thing to think about and can be eliminated as a possible cause of poor performance.

Step 3. Physical:

This step is possibly the most important aspect of releasing tension in the body...breathe. The type of breathing needed must come from the diaphragm. This type of “deep breathing” relaxes the muscles, hence reducing tension and provides an ideal opportunity to recharge the mind as well. The advantage of this step is that it can be performed at any stage throughout the bout.

Need to get your breath back? Move around and get the feet moving and take some deep breaths to get your focus back. Deep breathing provides you with time to possibly, remember your plan of attack, readjust your outfit or just calm yourself down. Taking a deep breath can also ensure your concentration is a here and now mentality. Successful performers live in the present. They don't worry about a previous mistake. (Chamberlain, 2003).

Step 4. Technical:

Optimal performance needs to be an automatic response. The senses of the body receive information and analyse these cues to produce a response for the muscles. More highly skilled athletes are able to select appropriate “cues” from their surroundings and make the correct physical responses more consistently. These performers are referred to as “autonomous learners” as their physical responses are automatic.

An example of autonomous performers in jujitsu would be recognizing an opponent's possible movement based on the movement of their eyes. Their eyes will move focusing on their intended target, giving you a chance to preempt their intended target & counteract their move (e.g. If you watch someone's eyes as they attempt to punch you in the solar plexus, they will focus on the target they intend to strike before they move any other muscle, or the position of their feet). Somebody less skilled may not recognize these aspects of their opponent's body position or even look at their eyes or feet!!!. A contributing factor to enhancing performance is to be selective in which cues you observe. Concentrate on too many cues and your brain can become confused, leading to the old adage “paralysis through analysis”.

Athletes can freeze under pressure by thinking too much. They become performance orientated as opposed to letting the winning take care of itself (Sailes, 2005). Successful athletes focus on three or four main technical points to ensure their minds are focused on what they can control.

“Focus on a key thought – Tom Amberry consistently shoots 500 free throw shots in a row. His focus is not on missing, but cues such as ensuring his shoulders and feet are properly aligned, lines up his fingers the same each time, bounces the ball exactly three times, looks then shoots” (Gower, 2003).

When preparing for a bout in Jujitsu, it is important to have a list of key thoughts which can ensure optimum performance. This technical step is very easily implemented and does not require much time, hence may be used at anytime during a bout. Examples of key thoughts can be:

- Staying on your toes;
- Hands up;
- Chin up;
- Knees bent

It is a good idea to have a diary recording specific cues which have enhanced performance. The reason for this is some days you may require different cues to help you. Therefore, if one cue is not working, substitute this for another. This maintains a clear mental focus which is based on solid tactics plus the bonus of successful outcomes associated with this cue.

Step 6. Execute:

As the Nike saying says, “Just do it!” Once you have got a clear picture in your head and your body is receptive to the environment, trust your instincts and let your body take over. Autonomous performers must trust that their actions and reactions have been honed through countless hours of practice so physical performance becomes automatic responses.

Conclusion:

As stated in the introduction, structured scientific mental training can improve our competitive performance, (Beale, 2005). Mental preparation is the cornerstone to all elite performers and their success. The ability to get into the “zone” is preferable but often elusive. The six steps outlined above, provide athletes with a process which can provide greater access to the “zone”.

Too many performers fail to get into the mental zone through fear of failure and refusing to let go of the conscious performance (Sailes, 2005). Mistakes can be made even if all of the above steps have been faithfully followed. However, the aim when performing in any competitive structure is to perform consistently and ensure you do not beat yourself through careless preparation.

As for any skill development, practice for each of these steps is crucial so that they become second nature whilst performing in pressure situations. Therefore, practising these six steps in training sessions and practice bouts will allow the individual to refine these steps to see what works best for themselves. Some of these six steps can be combined to maximize available time. For example, when breathing deeply to release tension, it is a golden opportunity to consider the tactics used. Are they working, continue as before. If they are not, need to change. Has your focus drifted? Take a deep breath and recall a key cue to focus your attention. This cue doesn't work? Try another one.

Through perfect practice and repetition, you can refine your mental preparation and give yourself the best opportunity to perform to your potential.

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