

Preparing

One of my favorite yoga teachers always starts the class in child's pose, reminding us that as the class gets harder we can come back to this position to rest whenever we need to. However, he then always tells us to make sure that we only take a break when it is our body that needs it, and not just our mind telling us to give up. So how do we know the difference? He tells us that our bodies are much stronger than we think they are, and that our thoughts often keep us from going all the way to our physical limits. At the same time, our minds are not limited by many of the physical features of the world. For example, even though you know you may not be able to hold a handstand on a cantering horse you may be able to picture yourself doing it for a few rounds without difficulty. If our minds are virtually limitless, then why are we so often held back by supposedly mental qualities such as fear, nerves, and negative emotions? When it seems as if your "mind" is keeping you from doing things that your body would otherwise be perfectly capable of doing, it may be time to even out your physical exercise with some mental training.

Just like athletes all have different body types giving them unique strengths and weaknesses, we approach the "mental" training with the attitude that it is a process, not just a one size fits all system for dealing with everything that is not physical. I am not suggesting that all of my ideas may work for you, but hopefully this article can serve as a launching point for developing your own unique training plan that focuses on aspects of training you cannot physically see.

Have you ever planned what you were going to *think* about in a situation before it happens? You may picture yourself acting in a certain way in the future, but it can actually be more helpful to picture what you are going to think about in an upcoming event. For every routine that you perform, you should have a mental routine to go with it. Start out with literally listing and thinking about every aspect of a single move in your routine. This can include corrections from your trainer, the way you're gripping the handles, how tight you have to squeeze your legs, at what point you are in the music... as many things as you can think of. This then leads to a general feeling of a move, so that when you think of it, everything that you need to do is stored in a perfect picture of what that move feels and looks like. Everyone will go about this differently, for example you may imagine how it *feels* to be performing the move perfectly, or you may imagine what it *looks* like, as if watching yourself vault. You may also find it helpful to have an anchor word for each of your moves. It can be something as basic as "toes" if that is something you tend to forget or as abstract as "water" if you need to remember to be fluid with the horse. Once you get to a point where you can then easily picture each move perfectly on its own, you can begin to visualize your entire routine.

The most helpful part of mental training as opposed to your actual time vaulting on the horse, is that your time is much less limited. You can visualize yourself running compulsories for half an hour without really getting tired, and you have total freedom over when you do this. This time allows you to really think about things that you just don't have time to think about when you are on the horse or barrel. I find it helpful at first

to visualize routines almost in slow motion, or without any sort of time reference, so that you don't limit yourself to how much you are thinking about when first starting to visualize it as a whole. However, it is really important that you get to a point where you can easily run through your entire routine in your head in real time, matching up thoughts to actions. Eventually, you should be able to run through your entire routine very quickly, showing that you are able to bring to mind your entire mental routine without struggling to remember any of your anchor words or cues.

The next step is to add music. This can be really helpful because certain points in your music can actually act as cues, or anchors, reminding you what to think about throughout your routine. For example, in addition to knowing that you have to start your needle right as the chorus starts up, you can also use it as a reminder to straighten your leg because that is something you tend to forget. Another benefit to visualizing your routine while listening to the music that you perform to is that it gives you a sense of how much time you actually have.

It is important that you regularly incorporate your mental training with physical training, as there are obviously many issues that come into play in the "real world" that we just don't factor in while visualizing a perfect routine. Mental training is a great tool for making sure you are paying attention to important signs your body may be trying to tell you. For example, if you are afraid of doing a move, you should take a moment to think about why that is. In his book Thinking Body, Dancing Mind, Jerry Ling says, "Remember that fear can be helpful to you, alerting you to where you need to be careful and prepared. Assess the risks and prepare properly. Information-gathering is a wonderful way of releasing fear. The unknown is fear's fuel" (92). Usually we have fear of things we have never done before, but just because we don't know what is going to happen doesn't mean we should give up. At the same time, it can also be a bad idea to completely ignore your fearful intuitions and just go for a dangerous move without thinking. Instead of allowing your fear to keep you from performing a move, think of it as a tool to help you feel more focused. Pay attention to your fear but don't let it hold you back.

If you already know what you are going to think, and what you are going to do, where is there room to be nervous? Even though this sounds simple, you are not alone if your problem is that you tend to get nervous before you compete. It may be because your body all of a sudden has all this extra energy (it knows something important is happening, or else you clearly wouldn't be wearing full body spandex!) but it doesn't know where to direct it. If you are still at the bottom of the funnel during this competition mode, meaning you haven't narrowed down what it is you need to be consciously be aware of while vaulting, it is likely that you will be overwhelmed with everything there is to remember. During a competition, it is a good idea to give yourself some time to check in with how you are feeling about an hour before you go into the arena. There really is no formula for success here. Some days you may be feeling totally distracted and unfocused, in which case it would be a good idea to sit yourself down in a quiet area and just go through your routine in your head, until you feel you are in control and connected with your thoughts. However, if you are feeling overwhelmed with too many things to think about, you may want to calm yourself down by reminding yourself that your body knows

what to do at this point, and all you have to do is think of your anchor words and the rest will come naturally. The key idea here is that you don't ignore how you are feeling, but instead really tune in and use your emotions as a guide for how to best prepare yourself in the final moments.

Ideally, by the time you get the competition, you have thought about each move of your routine in so much in detail that it seems to be engraved in your body. You may consciously have one cue for each move or section, but everything you have thought about in your mental training comes naturally to you. Some people have described this feeling as being in the zone. It seems as though everything has slowed down because you are fully aware of all that is going on, yet you are completely relaxed, everything seems effortless. It is kind of like you have cleaned out your brain to make room for everything you need it for in that single moment in time. Planning out what you are going to think about during your routine is so important because it keeps out negative and distracting thoughts that might otherwise randomly come up. There are already going to be unknown factors that you can't control, so there is no need to waste energy on irrational thoughts.