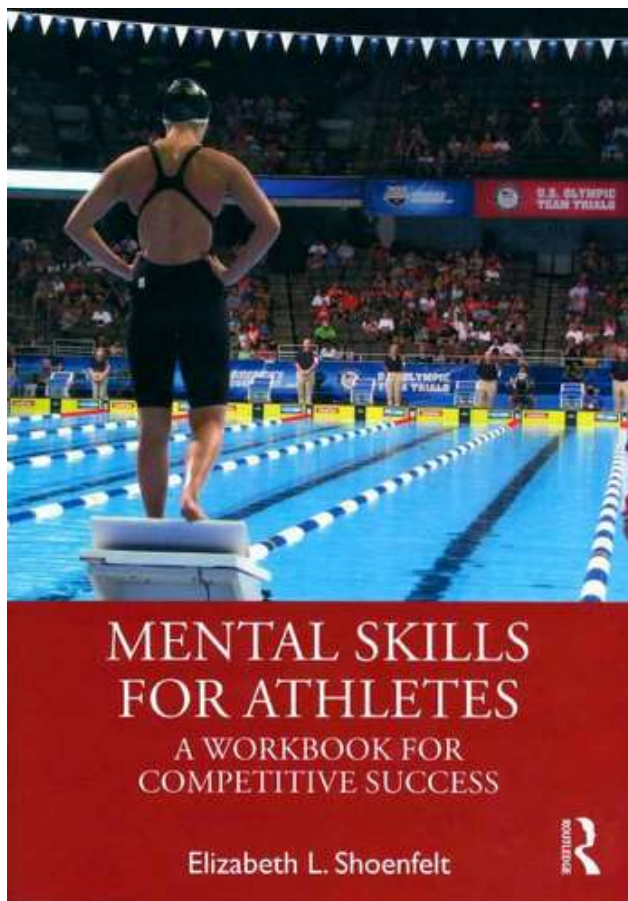


High-Level Performance: 'Mental Skills' is Personally Relevant

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"Mental Skills for Athletes: A Workbook for Competitive Success" by Elizabeth L. Shoenfelt. New York: Routledge (Taylor and Francis Group), 2019, 166 pages, \$34.95 (paperback).



“Although some may believe that 90 percent of performance is mental, that is not the case,” Elizabeth L. Shoenfelt explains near the beginning of “Mental Skills for Athletes: A Workbook for Competitive Success,” her exceptionally insightful and innovative new resource for athletes and those who coach, train and support them. “If you are an athlete performing at a high level such as intercollegiate or as a pro, in reality, mental skills can improve your ‘game’ by about 10 percent.”

“Performing at a high level requires a combination of ability, proper technique and mechanics, strategy, a lot of practice/training, and yes, mental skills,” she continues. “The 10 percent improvement in performance that can be accomplished with mental skills means a golfer shooting 80 can improve his game to the low 70s; a swimmer clocking a 75-second 100-meter butterfly can cut her time to 68 seconds; a batter hitting .250 can improve to .275; a basketball player shooting 68 percent from the free throw line can improve to 75 percent. In virtually every sport, a 10 percent improvement is significant.”

So begins Shoenfelt’s in-depth exploration of the intrinsic connection between the mental and physiological dimensions of athletic performance. Admittedly, I have never been much of a sports aficionado – that honor fell to my younger brother who played on several teams during his tenure in the public school system. But beginning in my early 30s, I became an avid runner, so much of what the author writes about so authoritatively still resonates with me on a number of levels, as I am sure it will with many readers. It is obvious from the first page, Shoenfelt knows her subject matter intimately; i.e., she has both the academic expertise as well as the proverbial real-world experience necessary to credibly approach the task at hand.

Structurally, the book consists of 12 chapters arranged in five sections: Part I (Introduction), consisting of the inaugural chapter; Part II (Mental Skills: A. The Mind (Cognitive Skills), which is comprised of chapters two through five; Part II (Mental Skills: B. The Body (Physiological Skills and the Mind-Body Connection), chapters six through eight; Part III (Team Skills and Special Situations), chapters nine through 12; and Part IV (Epilogue). As noted in the title, the narrative is centered on several “Exercises and Techniques” that serve to bring the manuscript to life by providing the reader with a hands-on guide for making the most of the insights provided.

For example, at the conclusion of “Problem Solving and Continuous Learning to Build Resilience,” the fifth chapter and one of my personal favorites, Shoenfelt includes an exercise called “Dealing with the ‘what- ifs’ ” that I found to be especially enlightening:

“In anticipation of a big competition, many athletes start to worry and think ‘what if (this happens)?’ Even though the ‘what-ifs’ are common, they are negative self-talk and are detrimental to performance. If the ‘what-ifs’ are viewed within a problem-solving context, they can be used to build confidence in your ability to address the challenges that will inevitably arise. Working through the ‘what-ifs,’ determining the best way to deal with the problem should it happen, and then mentally rehearsing successfully handling the problem can create preparedness to deal with potential situations. Exercise sheet 5.2a will take you through this process. Think of this worksheet as something of a flow-chart.”

If you want to see the details of the worksheet, you’ll have to buy the book – although I can assure you if you are involved with any aspect of performance enhancement, at virtually any level, the investment will be well worth it. Incidentally, I used this worksheet to prepare for a recent competitive 5K and I found it to be very helpful.

Shoenfelt is a university distinguished professor in the Department of Psychological Sciences at Western Kentucky University; she has a Ph.D. in industrial/organizational psychology (with a minor in experimental statistics and sport psychology) from Louisiana State University. The author or co-author of numerous refereed publications, she has more than 35 years of experience working with business and industry, government, education and sports with individuals, teams and organizations.

While Shoenfelt no doubt wrote “Mental Skills” with a fairly specific audience in mind, most of the concepts and techniques she describes in such articulate and uncomplicated detail also have much broader application. Consider the following from “Preparing for the Big Event,” the culminating chapter:

“Successful athletes are confident. Confidence is developed over time through a combination of positive thinking and success experiences. Confident athletes consistently use constructive thinking to focus on and benefit from their successes and to minimize errors and losses. Confidence enables us to trust our performance.”

I would argue this is true not only for athletes, but for anyone who is – or wants to be – successful in his or her career, relationship and life in general. In a very real sense, “Mental Skills” has a somewhat universal appeal; i.e., certainly one that extends beyond the sports realm.

As Robin S. Vealey, a professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Health at Miami University notes, “Shoenfelt delivers on the promise of being a user-friendly workbook that is chock-full of practical and innovative mental training tools for athletes. The content is science-based, but goes beyond the typical ‘why’ presented in other books to the sorely needed ‘how to’ in terms of providing specific worksheets and exercises that can be used to directly train mental skills in a systematic way. This cleverly organized book is a must-have for coaches, consultants, and/or athletes looking for concrete, individualized strategies to build mental skills.”

I could not agree more. Again, not being overly acquainted with the sports world to any significant extent, initially I was not sure I would find this one interesting or personally relevant. I was wrong on both counts. Highly recommended.

– *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*