

Welcome to The Psychology of Sport Blog, where we explore the mental side of athletic performance. The blog will focus on how changing our mindset can elevate our game on the netball court – and in life.

Practicing to be cognitively strong allows us to push through the final quarter of the game, it helps us limit mistakes and minimize injuries, resulting in outplaying the opponents. When our bodies are tired, our minds need to be strong so that we can overcome the physical battle.

“Mental toughness” is defined in The Oxford Dictionary as “A quality of mind or intellect characterized by, among other things, a refusal to be intimidated, a determination to finish a contest even when things are going badly, and an ability to control emotions and remain highly focused when under the pressure of intense competition”. What this means is that it is natural for us, as humans, to feel the pressure and stresses of taking part in competitive sports, but how we handle these situations depends on our mental skills training... just as our bodies and muscles can be trained, so can our minds.

Mental toughness is built through various skills. Let's break down the five key components:

Resilience

To be resilient means to be able to have the strength to overcome difficulties. Part of developing resilience is allowing yourself to work through the difficult times with the journey in mind – not only the destination. Psychologists have proven that difficult times build strength and character.[\[1\]](#) Resilience on the court means being able to withstand physicality and umpires not calling in your favour. It means knowing that your gameplay is tried and tested, and that the focus should be solely adaptation to the competition.

Focus

Why is it important to be focused in the sporting environment? Our ability to focus influences decision making, skill execution, error reduction, level of confidence and pressure management.[\[2\]](#) This means that to be focused on our sport and performance, we need to be able to tune out the noise that exists outside of the sport. Coach Sian, Apex Netball Academy coach, encourages her athletes to practice in a busy environment. We all know that high pressure situations can alter

gameplay, and therefore we need to be prepared for the distractions during a match by practicing in similar environments.

Emotional Control

Emotional control links directly to emotional maturity, often referred to as emotional intelligence.[\[3\]](#) It is built through mindfulness and emotional awareness. Are you able to recognize that you are upset, and more so, why you are upset? We can encourage emotional control through acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). ACT encourages athletes to acknowledge and process emotions rather than avoid them.[\[4\]](#) This fosters resilience in high-pressure situations. Acceptance and commitment practices create a court environment that welcomes uncomfortable situations and unfair circumstances.

Confidence

To have confidence means to be secure in yourself and to be proud of who you are. This means that you do not let your shortcomings hold you back from being the best version of yourself. Psychology teaches us that everyone has a unique set of experiences and interpretations of the world – not one person is the same.[\[5\]](#) There is truth in non-comparison and the same goes for the sports field. James Clear, author of “Atomic Habits”, explains how confidence is just proven practice. He quotes: “Of course I have confidence in myself, because I have proven over and over that I can do this”.

Commitment

When we talk about commitment, we do consider showing up to your practices and matches, but it is even more crucial to be committed to developing yourself outside of the immediate sport. This means commitment to building muscle memory, commitment to fitness, commitment to building mental skills, and commitment to becoming a better athlete. We can look at the top athletes in the world such as Karin Burger, professional New Zealand netball player, who came from school netball in South Africa and played herself up the ranks through club netball...[\[6\]](#) Courtney Bruce, professional Australian netball player, took time off from netball to take care of her depression...[\[7\]](#) and Mary Cholhok Nuba, professional Ugandan netball player, returned to netball after having a baby to be signed by one of the largest clubs in the United Kingdom.[\[8\]](#) Each of these athletes demonstrate the power of commitment – not just to training, but to their personal growth and

resilience.

So when we look at mental toughness, we can recognize that the concept includes a variety of attributes, from resilience through to commitment. Where focus, confidence and emotional control play a critical role in a player's presence and performance on the court. Ending with a nugget of knowledge from James Clear; he suggests that by making 1% changes every day a person can cultivate a lifestyle of long term consistency and athletic achievement.[9]

[1] Bell, C. C. (2001). Cultivating resiliency in youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 29(5), 375-381.

[2] Moran, A. (2008). Attention in sport. In *Advances in applied sport psychology* (pp. 205-230). Routledge.

[3] Nicholls, A. R., Levy, A. R., & Perry, J. L. (2015). Emotional maturity, dispositional coping, and coping effectiveness among adolescent athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 17, 32-39.

[4] Gardner, F. L., & Moore, Z. E. (2017). Mindfulness-based and acceptance-based interventions in sport and performance contexts. *Current opinion in psychology*, 16, 180-184.

[5] Vealey, R. S. (2009). Confidence in sport. *Sport psychology*, 1, 43-52.

[6] Pure As. (2020, July 6). *Karin Burger*. [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwH5YO9tRHQ>

[7] Davis, M. (2024, April 23). *'Do anything to be happy': Star Diamond's raw admission about move that stunned netball world*. Fox Sports.
<https://www.foxsports.com.au/netball/super-netball-2024-courtney-bruce-opens-up-on-mental-health-battles-sunshine-coast-lightning-australia-diamonds-west-coast-fever-news/news-story/e8ed339384b9511621ad772136740bae>

[8] Smarrelli, S. (2024, September 3). *'For them': Chalhok on her motivation*. Netball Australia. <https://netball.com.au/news/them-chalhok-her-motivation>

[9] Clear, J. (2022, December 28). *How to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones*



Mental Toughness in Athletes

with James Clear. Feel Better, Live More Podcast.