

The Doc Is In :

The Mental Game

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It has long been known that in one-on-one sporting events such as boxing, muay Thai and mixed martial arts, ten percent of the competitors win 90 percent of the competitions. Which begs the question, "why?"

Skill level, physical conditioning, and mental or psychological beliefs are the triad comprising a fighter's ability to compete successfully. As is the case with most champions, each attribute is honed to perfection. If not, as the level of competition improves, each weakness becomes an all-too-evident liability.

Many minimally experienced amateurs win because they possess better conditioning or greater mental toughness than their opponents. However, as the level of competition improves, opponents will be tougher and better conditioned. In essence, the better you get the better your opposition.

Fatigue does make cowards of us all. This is a universal maxim; physical conditioning should never be a problem if the fighter is a serious competitor. He should not only find a knowledgeable trainer, but he should also discover what works for him. Each fighter should know his body and know how to keep it in peak physical condition.

Probably the least-understood and least-practiced aspect of competition is the mental or psychological approach to winning. Since there is little difference in the skill level and conditioning of top-flight athletes, the difference between winning and losing often comes down to the mental game.

In a recent interview, former UFC Heavyweight and Light Heavyweight Champion Randy Couture explained, "Although most fighters believe that the fight is 90 percent mental and ten percent physical, they train 90 percent physical and ten percent mental. That is going to have to change as MMA continues to evolve or those fighters will be left behind."

Couture's observation about MMA is also just as applicable to muay Thai. Additionally, I think that the psychology of winning applies not only to competitive sports, but also to daily life.

What can we do to train our mental game and become a winner? First, we stop wasting time thinking about things that are not within our control. We focus our attention only on that which we can control while not giving in to our fears.

A good example of focused relaxation is the ritualized ring entrance of muay Thai fighters. Upon reaching the base of the ring near his own corner, the fighter kneels, meditates and prostrates himself three times. He stands, raises his hands to chest level, and then closes each nostril individually, inhaling then exhaling, before stepping up to the ring while avoiding the bottom step.

Reaching the ring apron, he meditates and then grasps the ropes with both hands. He then slides his hands out and back along the ropes three times before leaping over the top rope. He then goes to the center of the ring and pays respect in all four directions to the spectators. Usually, he will walk around the ring with one hand on the rope and the other shielding his sight from his opponent, symbolically sealing off the ring from all outside interference. This ritual, in addition to performing the wai kru, is designed to help the fighter concentrate, keep him loose, relieve anxiety, rid the ring of bad spirits, and pay respect to his teacher.

Secondly, you must understand that fear, anxiety, and a lack of self-confidence originate in our mind. Knowing this, we are free to accept or reject these negative feelings, to obey and take counsel of them, or to ignore them and move forward.

Negative thinking results in a loss of self-confidence and performance anxiety. You become afraid of making a mistake and thus fight cautiously. Come fight time, you second-guess yourself, which results in an inhibition of action. Your opponent repeatedly beats you to the punch, while you are left to ponder what went wrong.

According to an ancient Chinese proverb, "He who is afraid of losing is already defeated." In other words, if you are afraid of losing, you are thinking negatively. Remember, until the fight is fought, the speech is given, the test is taken, or the proposal is made, your thinking should be restricted solely to the activities which can make winning a reality. Losing requires no thought.

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