

MENTAL FITNESS

for Long-Term Athlete Development

Sport places both physical and mental demands on the athlete. In training and competition, the body is asked to push physical limits of endurance, power, speed, and strength. Similarly, the mind is asked to push mental barriers, such as focus, composure, and determination. Being a top performer in any sport requires a combination of physical fitness, technical skills, tactical readiness, and mental fitness.



**CANADIAN
SPORT FOR LIFE**

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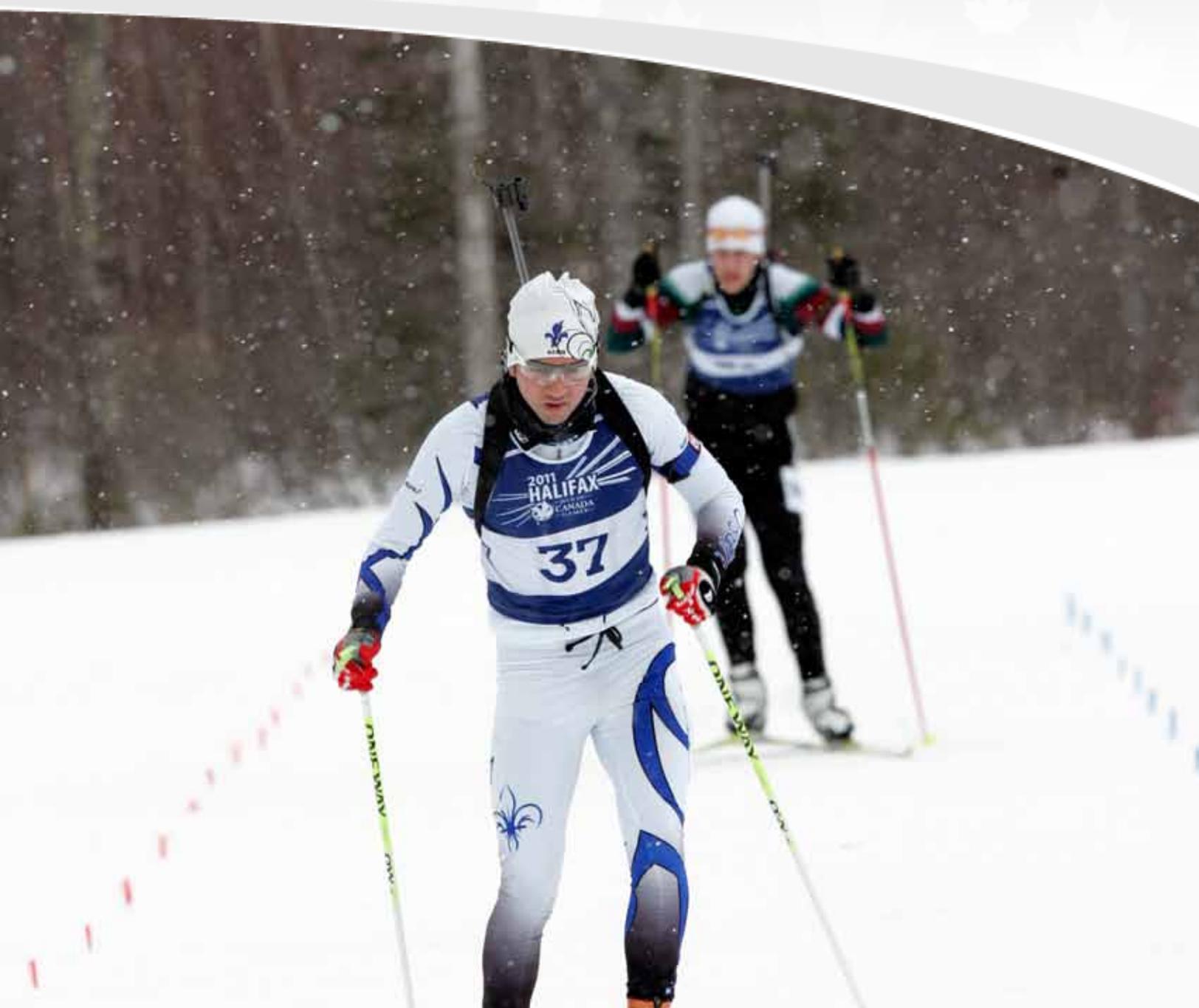
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Throughout an athlete's lifespan, there is a heavy focus on physical and technical development; however, when pressure mounts, it is often the mental fitness factor that can have the biggest impact on performance outcomes. Williams (2006) asserts that most athletes and coaches acknowledge that 40 to 90 per cent of success in high-performance sports is accounted for by mental factors, especially at elite levels of competition. Consequently, an athlete should develop and strengthen mental fitness throughout his or her long-term development.

MENTAL FITNESS

The term mental fitness will be used here as it promotes the idea of a dynamic concept, not a fixed outcome: it is in constant flux and development throughout an athlete's lifecycle. Although athletes can reach high levels of mental fitness as they progress through the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) stages, their mental capabilities will constantly be challenged as the demands, conditions, and pressures they face continue to change.

Expanded to the range of definitions for mental fitness presented in the cited literature (Gardner & Moore, 2007; Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2007; and Williams, 2005), mental fitness refers to an athlete's ability to optimally regulate thoughts, feelings, and behaviours and act in a purposeful and consistent manner while coping with the many demands placed on him or her. In our view, the true aim of developing mental fitness is to

- maximize performance;
- engage in quality training; and
- maintain a healthy level of mental well-being.

Athletes spend thousands of practice hours developing skills and strategies specific to their sports. Physical training focuses on aspects of performance such as endurance, speed, agility, strength, power, and technical skills. What athletes often neglect is to train their minds. Like physical training, mental fitness requires lots of deliberate practice. Athletes develop mental fitness by being open to mistakes, learning from setbacks and successes, and setting goals just beyond their present abilities, sometimes fumbling and stumbling as you go, in addition to progressing in the direction intended. As Sharon Begley, author of *Train Your Mind, Change Your Brain*, states, "One can sculpt the brain's emotional circuitry as profoundly as one can sculpt one's pectoral muscles" (Begley, 2007, p. 231).

Canadian Sport for Life (CS4L) is a movement to improve the quality of sport and physical activity in Canada. CS4L links sport, education, recreation and health and aligns community, provincial and national programming.

Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) is a seven-stage training, competition and recovery pathway guiding an individual's experience in sport and physical activity from infancy through all phases of adulthood. CS4L, with LTAD, represents a paradigm shift in the way Canadians lead and deliver sport and physical activity in Canada.

Mental Fitness, Attributes, and Skills

MENTAL FITNESS, ATTRIBUTES, AND SKILLS

When you think of a mentally fit athlete, who comes to mind? Williams and Krane (2005) reviewed 20 years of research pertaining to the psychological attributes of top performers. Based on this research and observations from this field, common mental fitness attributes linked to elite performers include the following:

- high self-confidence;
- commitment and ability to set goals;
- composure, motivation, having perspective;
- positive attitude and mindset;
- mindfulness, focused on task;
- emotional control;
- ability to manage stress and anxiety;
- control of activation and relaxation levels;
- well-developed competitive plans;
- ability to embrace and manage pressure;
- adaptability and self-regulation;
- passion and love for sport; work-ethic;
- responsibility; and
- ability to manage team environments and performance demands.

These attributes do not guarantee the highest levels of elite athletic performance, but they are consistent among top performers. Most elite athletes cultivate these attributes through intentional mental fitness development and years of learning from personal performance experiences.



How do athletes develop mental fitness? The mental training process typically involves the following four steps:

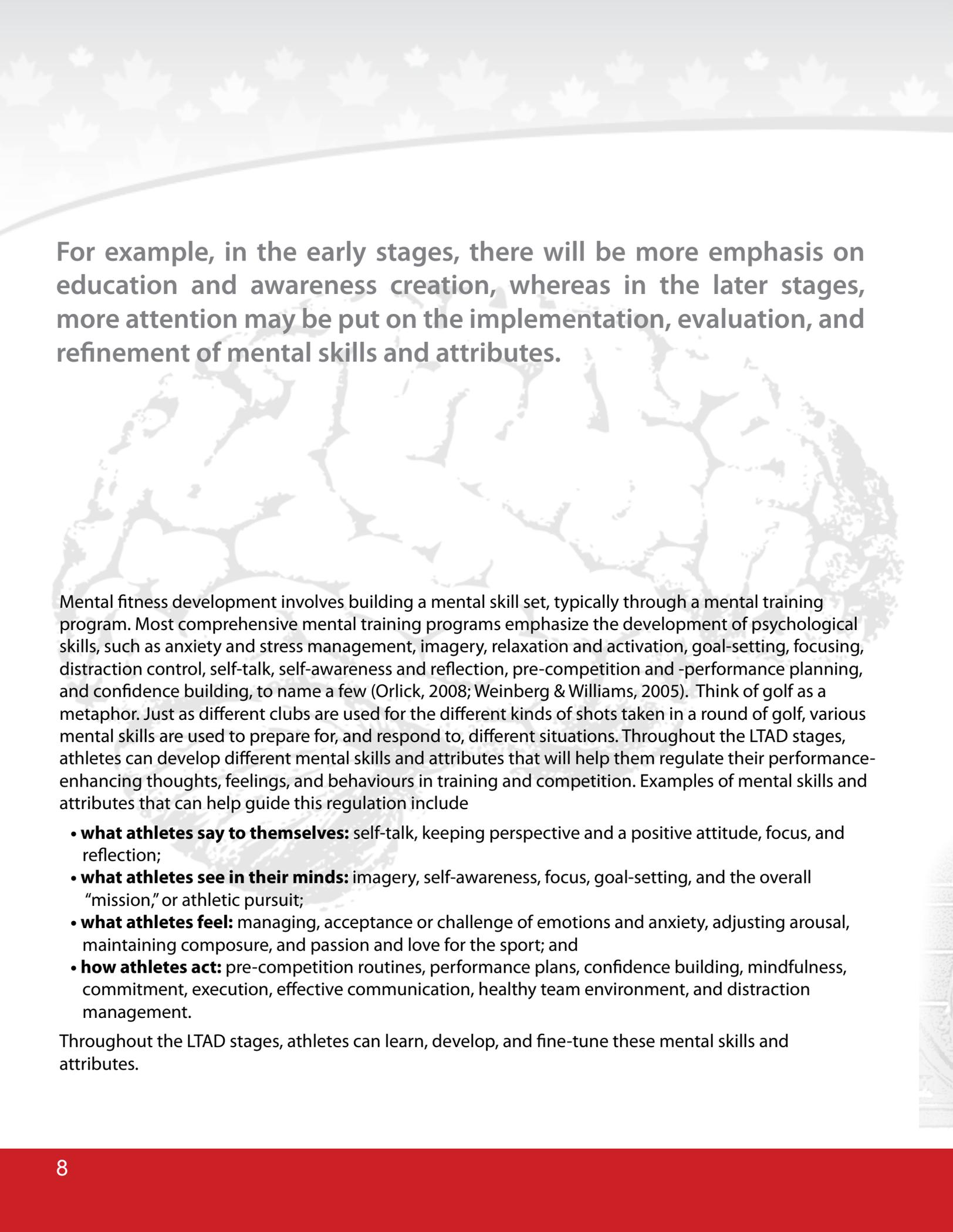
1. **Education:** providing foundational knowledge regarding mental fitness principles and strategies.
2. **Awareness:** increasing athletes' self-knowledge by helping them reflect on responses related to their best and less than best performance situations, experiences, and perspectives.
3. **Implementation:** challenging athletes to apply newly acquired knowledge of performance principles, strategies, and self-knowledge in performance situations.
4. **Evaluation:** inviting athletes, and external observers, to evaluate mental fitness capacities and identify key lessons that can be applied to future performances.



Mental Fitness, Attributes, and Skills



Throughout the LTAD stages, the mental attributes and skills being developed may stay the same, but the specific focus or next important step being emphasized varies.



For example, in the early stages, there will be more emphasis on education and awareness creation, whereas in the later stages, more attention may be put on the implementation, evaluation, and refinement of mental skills and attributes.

Mental fitness development involves building a mental skill set, typically through a mental training program. Most comprehensive mental training programs emphasize the development of psychological skills, such as anxiety and stress management, imagery, relaxation and activation, goal-setting, focusing, distraction control, self-talk, self-awareness and reflection, pre-competition and -performance planning, and confidence building, to name a few (Orlick, 2008; Weinberg & Williams, 2005). Think of golf as a metaphor. Just as different clubs are used for the different kinds of shots taken in a round of golf, various mental skills are used to prepare for, and respond to, different situations. Throughout the LTAD stages, athletes can develop different mental skills and attributes that will help them regulate their performance-enhancing thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in training and competition. Examples of mental skills and attributes that can help guide this regulation include

- **what athletes say to themselves:** self-talk, keeping perspective and a positive attitude, focus, and reflection;
- **what athletes see in their minds:** imagery, self-awareness, focus, goal-setting, and the overall “mission,” or athletic pursuit;
- **what athletes feel:** managing, acceptance or challenge of emotions and anxiety, adjusting arousal, maintaining composure, and passion and love for the sport; and
- **how athletes act:** pre-competition routines, performance plans, confidence building, mindfulness, commitment, execution, effective communication, healthy team environment, and distraction management.

Throughout the LTAD stages, athletes can learn, develop, and fine-tune these mental skills and attributes.

Mental Fitness and Performance Phases

MENTAL FITNESS AND PERFORMANCE PHASES

Each LTAD stage will focus on the mental skills and messages considered most important for each stage of sport development. Various skills and strategies can also be used throughout the different phases of performance. To illustrate this, the Integrated Model of Human Performance involves three broad, interactive phases (Gardner & Moore, 2007). The Pre-Performance Phase involves preparation activities that promote readiness for performance. The Performance Phase involves skill execution and the regulation of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours during performance. Lastly, the Post-Performance Response Phase involves responses to performance outcomes and circumstances which can have a lasting impact on future performances if not debriefed.

STRUCTURE OF ARTICLE

The remaining pages of this article will outline mental fitness development suggestions for each stage of the LTAD model. In providing recommendations as to how to develop mental fitness skills and attributes for each LTAD stage, the following structure will be used:

- **Core principles:** The first section will highlight core principles and mental skills and attributes that will be emphasized and developed during the stage.
- **Mental fitness activities:** This section will outline the key mental fitness messages and activities that are recommended to help promote the development of mental fitness skills and attributes during the stage.
- **Key messages:** The final section will provide recommendations as to how athletes, coaches, and parents can promote mental fitness development during the stage.

Active Start (0-6 years)

ACTIVE START (0-6 YEARS)

Before athletes develop a passion for their sport, they form an emotional association with physical activity. The goal in the Active Start stage is for young children to rack up positive experiences within sport activity; these can come from a coach that they like, a team or sport environment they find exciting and inclusive, or a chance to experience the freedom of play and to embrace small successes every day. This positive emotional profile will energize and inspire whatever passion for sport an athlete may develop.

The foundation of mental fitness is a set of beliefs that form in a young athlete's mind and are reinforced and strengthened by a set of experiences in sport. Here are the seeds of that foundation:



Core Principles:

- Sport and physical activity are fun. They provide an arena of release; play; and connection to oneself, one's body, and others.
- The sport environment is a safe, enjoyable, inclusive, and exciting place to be. The people in it will support the child in positive and respectful ways.
- Sport has a place for everyone. Each child can strive to grow and improve at his or her own level, and all successes can be celebrated and acknowledged.
- **Attitude** – If the child has a positive attitude, he or she will have more fun, energy, courage, and success. Modelling a positive attitude for the child will help support this principle.
- **Imagination** – Children at this age excel in imaginative play. Encouraging children to imagine themselves positively in sport can make the experience fun and inspiring.

Mental Fitness Activities

These foundational beliefs can be best developed and maintained with consistent messaging to athletes, coaches, and parents. The following chart highlights key mental fitness activities to maximize optimal messaging to young athletes.

| Phase | Mental Fitness Activities |
|------------------|--|
| Pre-Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities are for the child's enjoyment and success. • The focus is on feeling good, having fun, trying your best, and meeting new friends. • Everyone involved supports the child in achieving these goals. • The child's attention is focused on the positives of sport participation. They think things like, "Today will be fun" and, "You can do this". • The children's imaginations are nurtured by encouraging them to imagine themselves having fun. |
| Performance | <p>Present key messages of success to the child throughout the performance, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "You can do it." • "Work hard and try your best." • "Get back up when you fall." • "Try again if you can't do it the first time." • "Laugh and have fun." • "Have fun with your teammates and make new friends." • "Work up a sweat." • "Try something new." |
| Post-Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help the child reflect on the following questions: Did you try your hardest? Did you have fun? Did you feel good? What did you achieve? What did you do well? What are the things you can't wait to try next time? What are you most looking forward to? • Encourage the child to congratulate teammates, give them high-fives, and tell others, "Good job." • Encourage the child to practice and play at home. |

Key Messages:

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| <i>Athletes</i> | Understand that success means giving your best effort and having fun. |
| <i>Coaches</i> | Make a personal connection with each child and stay focused on giving them a positive experience. The key is finding little successes in everything they do. Bring everything back to fun and effort at this stage. Avoid reference to talent or outcome. |
| <i>Parents</i> | Positive, positive, positive. Be your children's biggest fan. Most importantly, tell them you love, support, and believe in them, regardless of how they perform. This will allow them to separate personal value from success and failure in sport. |

Fundamentals (Females 6-8 years, Males 6-9 years)

FUNDAMENTALS (FEMALES 6-8 YEARS; MALES 6-9 YEARS)

In the FUNdamentals stage, children are primarily motivated by the desire to have with their friends in a wide variety of enjoyable physical activities, sports, and games. Children can learn and explore different movements and skills through structured activities and participation in unstructured play. Their self-esteem starts developing at this stage and can be further nurtured by reinforcing their effort, creativity, enjoyment, and learning. Additionally, children start developing a level of self-awareness in the way they perceive, think, feel and act. At this stage, basic concepts of ethics in sports (sportsmanship, fair play, teamwork) and rules of a game can be introduced. This helps with the development of decision-making, behavioural, and social skills.

Core Principles:

- Children participate in different type of structured and unstructured physical activity, games, and play. They do not commit solely to any one activity or sport.
- Rather than winning and outcomes, fun, creativity, and effort are at the centre of sport activity. Every activity offers children the opportunity to learn something and have fun with friends.
- Basic concepts of relaxation and imagery can be introduced in creative and fun ways. Children's experiences, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings from their participation in sport activities are acknowledged.
- Basic rules and ethics in sports activities can be introduced.



| Phase | Mental Fitness Activities |
|------------------|---|
| Pre-Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about all different kinds of physical activities in positive ways. • Introduce simple relaxation and body-awareness exercises in creative ways, such as “spaghetti toes”: getting child to imagine their body feels as light and loose as a noodle (Orlick, 2011). • Introduce simple imagery exercises in creative ways, like visualizing the colour of grass on the field or pretending to be an arrow diving into the water. • Emphasize fun and enjoyment while children do activities together. • Explain basic rules in games and principles of fair play for each activity. |
| Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give each child opportunities to participate in all activities, and encourage any effort and creativity they display. • Introduce positive self-talk and simple focusing activities. • Encourage children to try again after successes and mistakes, and introduce ways to help keep a positive perspective. • Reinforce principles of teamwork and fair play (teammates celebrating together and encouraging each other). • Use teachable moments to reinforce sportsmanship, teamwork, and ethics. |
| Post-Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight and help the child reflect on the experience he or she got from the activity: Was it fun? What was most fun about it? What did you learn today? What did the coach say? What were the rules of the games? Reiterate any positive messages. • Stimulate creativity and imagery skills: e.g., When at home, use different modalities like drawing or painting to re-create the sporting activity and playing games with friends. |

Key Messages:

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| <i>Athletes</i> | Try balancing different activities. Have fun with them and your friends or teammates. Share and talk about your experiences with friends and family. |
| <i>Coaches</i> | Create an environment in which children want to participate, can show their desire for physical activity, and can play with friends. Modify games and rules to maximize action for everyone, and reinforce any effort, progress and learning. |
| <i>Parents</i> | Offer different types of physical activity on a daily basis through organized sports in a club or community as well as through unstructured play and games. Share your own happiness and support when children show their enjoyment, effort, and creativity. Listen to and acknowledge their experiences. |

Learn to Train (Females 8-11 years; Males 9-12 years)

LEARN TO TRAIN (FEMALES 8-11 YEARS; MALES 9-12 YEARS)

During this stage, athletes develop foundational skills that lead to success in sport. They are introduced to foundational mental fitness concepts that complement their physical development and enhance their learning experience and self-awareness. Mental skills are introduced and taught on a basic level, and opportunities for testing out the new skills in training and performance settings are provided. Athletes should recognize the importance of developing a positive work ethic and responsibility in both practice and competition and enjoy this effort. They start to learn how to accept mistakes and setbacks as learning opportunities while celebrating success resulting from their work ethic. Additionally, athletes continue to learn to work as a team, respect others, and develop a love and passion for sport.



Core Principles:

- Basic principles of goal-setting are reviewed and incorporated into training along with an emphasis on effort and responsibility.
- Basic awareness of responses to demands, pressure, and nervousness are cultivated as a precursor to the skill of mindfulness, and simple breathing techniques are introduced.
- Athletes develop a basic understanding and awareness of focus that allows them to connect with what they are doing and get the most out of their training and performance.
- Imagery and positive thinking are used to continue developing athletes' confidence and motivation, while arousal control strategies such as relaxation and activation can be further developed to manage intensity and emotions.
- Athletes learn how to communicate, respect, and positively interact with their teammates.
- Work ethic, responsibility, and passion for sport are developed as athletes begin recognizing that hard work and a good attitude lead to improvement.

| Phase | Mental Fitness Activities |
|------------------|---|
| Pre-Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide education on the basic principles of goal-setting and incorporate setting a few targets in daily training to allow athletes to maximize their time and effort. • Teach basic arousal control (relaxation, activation) and imagery techniques to help athletes deal with pressure or nervousness and see themselves being successful. • Continue developing the concept of positive perspective and self-talk, and help athletes prioritize effort over results. |
| Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce the concept of focus and provide simple strategies to help athletes identify important cues to guide their attention. • Create awareness of thoughts that may arise in different situations, and introduce basic strategies athletes can use to develop positive thinking. • Introduce concepts of teamwork and encourage athletes to demonstrate team spirit and respect for others. |
| Post-Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage athletes to reflect on their performance, asking questions such as, What did I do well? What can I improve on? What was most fun? • Encourage athletes to visualize at least one thing they did well. This helps them reinforce imagery skill and build confidence. • Highlight examples of fair play and teamwork, and use teachable moments to reinforce sportsmanship. |

Key Messages:

- Athletes* Your effort in both physical and mental fitness skills will result in improved performance. Understanding and beginning to apply your foundational mental fitness skills will help to guide the development of your physical and technical skills.
- Coaches* Encourage holistic sport development, including the integration of mental fitness activities into training. Mental skills and attributes take time to develop, so allow time and opportunity to do this. Emphasize effort, responsibility, fun and play, teamwork, and respect for others.
- Parents* Continue to support and believe in your child. Emphasize effort, teamwork, and respect for others. Acknowledge results, but reinforce factors related to the performance process.

Train to Train (Females 11-15 years; Males 12-16 years)

TRAIN TO TRAIN (FEMALES 11-15 YEARS; MALES 12-16 YEARS)

During the Train to Train stage, the volume of training increases with emphasis on consolidating basic sport-specific skills and tactics. There is also an accelerated adaptation to aerobic, speed, and strength training. Developing athletes become more engaged in competitions with peers, which can lead to an overemphasis on winning and outcomes. The focus still needs to be on learning, applying, testing and refining physical, technical, tactical, and mental skills/strategies, as well as how to use them in competitive settings. To help athletes learn to cope with physical and mental challenges in competition, a comprehensive mental training program should be introduced at this stage. Taught in various settings, mental training programs can include goal-setting, relaxation, activation, focus, self-talk, imagery, confidence, and motivation-building techniques. In addition, athletes are encouraged to start developing pre-competition routines and mental preparation strategies to coincide with their physical preparations. To help facilitate learning from each competition, more formal debriefing strategies can also be introduced. Athletic progress in this stage may differ from athlete to athlete because of differences in rates of development (such as growth spurts). Thus, individual support may be required to help athletes maintain motivation and self-confidence and cope with success and failure.



Core Principles:

- While training demands and competitive focus increase, emphasis should remain on learning, developing, testing, and refining all skills and strategies (e.g., physical, technical, tactical, and mental).
- A comprehensive mental training program, including mental skill development, can be incorporated.
- Athletes are also introduced to pre-competition routines, mental preparation plans, and more formal performance-debriefing strategies.
- Athletes' awareness and mindfulness of mental, physical, and emotional responses to demands and pressure continues to grow.
- Athletes can become aware of a positive sport-life balance and start to monitor mental, emotional, and physical fatigue.
- Continued development of teamwork and ethical play should be emphasized.

| Phase | Mental Fitness Activities |
|------------------|--|
| Pre-Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach and integrate different types of goal-setting strategies for training and competition. • Teach athletes how to regulate arousal states for optimal performance in competition. • Emphasize positive self-talk and carrying a optimistic attitude to increase motivation and self-confidence. • Teach athletes to apply and maintain different types of focus to execute and respond to performance demands. • Develop refocusing and distraction-control strategies. • Develop and implement personalized imagery “scripts” on a more regular basis to practise or refine different aspects of performance. • Develop and implement strategies to manage pressure, fear, and stress. • Teach athletes how to plan and develop personalized mental preparation strategies and competition routines. • Apply, test, and refine athletes’ mental skills and attributes in both training and competitions. |
| Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and implement competition competition-focus plans and self-talk strategies. • Develop and incorporate refocusing and distraction-control strategies. • Provide methods of monitoring performance and making adjustments as required. • Promote teamwork and fair-play; facilitate communication. |
| Post-Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop debriefing strategies that help athletes reflect on performance in training and competition, identify strengths and areas to improve, take responsibility, and celebrate accomplishments and efforts. • Introduce ways to monitor mental, emotional, and physical fatigue. • Emphasize supporting and encouraging teammates. |

Key messages:

- Athletes* Be open to mental training and explore how it can help you in training and competition. Practise implementing mental skills in situations in which you face both minor and major challenges.
- Coaches* Incorporate mental training into your yearly training plan and reinforce mental fitness principles in both training and competition. Help facilitate access to sport psychology resources.
- Parents* Help your child recognize the benefits of developing mental skills. Help him or her manage increasing competitive pressure by focusing on the process and de-emphasizing winning and outcomes. Ask your child what he or she learned today, what he or she did well in training or competition, and what he or she would like to improve and try next time. Find at least one positive comment to share with your child. Be his or her greatest fan.

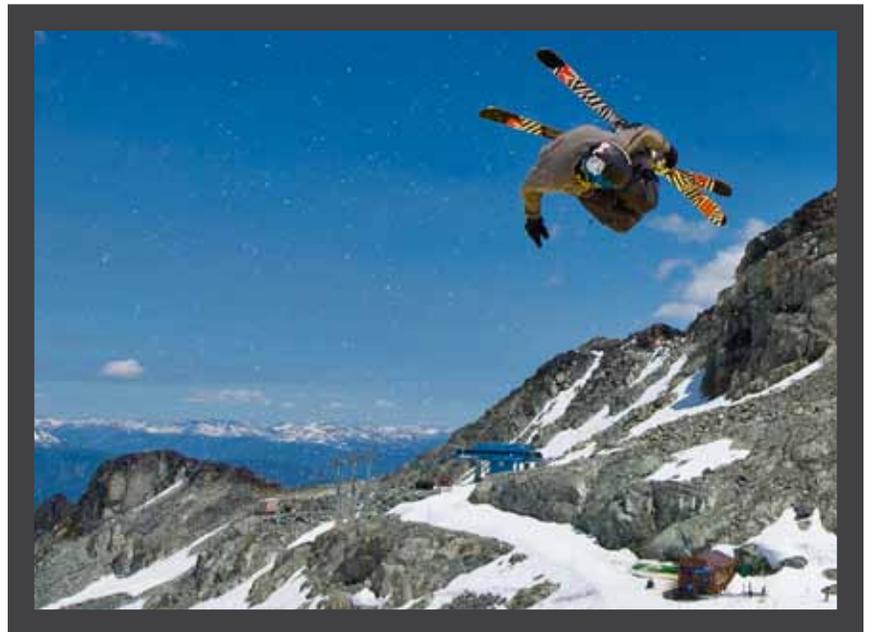
Train to Compete (Females 15-21 years; Males 16-23 years)

TRAIN TO COMPETE (FEMALES 15-21 YEARS; MALES 16-23 YEARS)

In the Train to Compete stage, athletes become more sport-, event-, and position-specific within their training regime. The brain is more developed, and critical thinking has become more established. Advanced mental preparation strategies are incorporated, and focus on mental skills needed for competition and quality training increases. Coaches may begin educating athletes on the purpose of training and recovery and how it will prepare them to compete. With increased understanding of why they are doing what they are doing, athletes can develop greater intrinsic motivation, and confidence to compete. Athletes can also develop a greater self-awareness towards individual responses to competition stress, and the way they compete under and deal with pressure. Key mental skills developed in this stage include pre-competition and competition planning, stress management, arousal and distraction control, focus, imagery, and competition evaluation. Increased training volume and commitment levels may make it difficult for athletes to maintain a well-rounded identity alongside sports; encourage a healthy sport-life balance and keep success and failure in perspective. A re-emphasis on fun and enjoyment is essential, as is the encouragement of non-athletic pursuits.

Core Principles:

- Athletes develop awareness of how day-to-day training connects to competition readiness.
- Education about individual responses to performance anxiety and strategies for managing and accepting responses takes place.
- Athletes practise and refine pre-, post-, and in-competition routines and develop competition strategy planning and execution
- Athletes practise focusing and refocusing plans and learn distraction-management skills needed for competition.
- The practice and refinement of post-performance debriefing is further developed.



| Phase | Mental Fitness Activities |
|------------------|---|
| Pre-Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set appropriate goals for training and competition, encompassing different types of goals (e.g., process, performance, outcome goals). • Develop sound focus and refocus plans. • Use imagery to reinforce and correct key skills and desired outcomes for performance. • Refine pre-determined competitive routines/plans. • Continue to develop and refine optimal activation level and arousal adjustment. |
| Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Execute and test performance plans developed for competition. • Establish one or two simple cues to focus attention on important segments of the competition. • Follow and refine pre-determined competition routines/plans. • Use positive reminders that maintain confidence and motivation. • Introduce and develop the practice of mindfulness. • Normalize, accept, and regulate emotions such as anxiety, fear, and anger. |
| Post-Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debrief performances. Highlight strengths and areas for improvement. • Focus on the positive lessons from each performance. |

Key Messages

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| <i>Athletes</i> | View every competition as a learning opportunity. Focus on the process and all the variables you can control prior to a competition. Practise readiness and flexibility for any competitive situation that may arise in your sport. Continue to use focusing, positive self-talk, imagery, relaxation, and activation strategies at the appropriate times for you. Work with your coach to develop a competitive routine that gets you ready to compete. |
| <i>Coaches</i> | Focus on the positives and reinforce athletes' readiness for competition. Help athletes focus on a few simple process goals for the competition and critically debrief performance execution. Be strategic in helping athletes choose competitions that will maximize development while avoiding mental or emotional burnout from participating in too many competitions. |
| <i>Parents</i> | Continue to be a positive support for your competitive athlete. Showing encouragement, enthusiasm, and excitement around a competition is good, but too much can add extra pressure for an athlete. Act your "normal" self prior to, during, and after a competition. Avoid statements such as, "I hope you win," "Looking forward to seeing you on the podium," and "How are you feeling?" prior to a competition. Despite their good intentions, such statements can be distracting and take away from an athlete's normal pre-competition routine. Communicate well with your athlete and give him or her space if needed before and during a competition. Celebrate together afterwards when possible. |

Train to Win (Females 18+ years; Males 19+ years)

TRAIN TO WIN (FEMALES 18+ YEARS; MALES 19+ YEARS)

During the Train to Win stage, athletes develop a much greater self-awareness of the competition routines and mental strategies that work for them individually. Train to Win focuses on refining the mental skills more closely related to performance outcomes and achieving personal performance bests. Identifying and executing a specific focus during training, practising quality recovery, and managing distractions are key to performance consistency. Athletes need to maintain and build on their strengths, focus on improving weaknesses, and be able to adapt to different performance environments. In addition, academic, financial, and relationship demands may be more prevalent, so athletes should continue to develop strategies to maintain a healthy sport-life balance. Finally, athletes at this stage can start to think about a plan for “retirement” from competing at the highest level. At some point during this stage, athletes are encouraged to think proactively about life after competitive sport and begin working on a transition plan.

Core Principles:

- Athletes establish a high level of self-awareness and ability to listen to their bodies’ needs in relation to performance and recovery.
- Athletes learn to manage and accept pre-performance anxiety in varying competitive situations; appropriate coping skills to meet excessive demands are developed.
- It is important to maintain a high degree of intrinsic or self-determined motivation.
- Athletes should develop a yearly plan for mental training around their competition schedules.
- Behaving like a role model and professional is expected.
- Discussing plans, support, and strategies helps athletes transition from high-level sport.
- Athletes develop perspective and a well-rounded identity outside of simply being an athlete.



| Phase | Mental Fitness Activities |
|------------------|--|
| Pre-Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to use and refine well-developed goal-setting, focusing, and imagery skills. • Continue monitoring and adapting to mental, emotional, and physical fatigue. • Practise mindfulness (ability to stay in the present moment) regularly. • Practise accepting and/or regulating thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations prior to competition. • Continue to refine pre-, during, and post-competition plans. |
| Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to execute performance plans in different environments. • Continue to adapt to varying environments and follow re-focussing plans when needed. • Continue to focus on simple cues for each critical phase of the competition. • Continue to be aware of reactions and regulate emotions. • Highlight strengths and use of positive reminders that maintain confidence and motivation. • Continue to develop teamwork and encourage positive rivalry. |
| Post-Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debrief performances and highlight key strengths and areas for improvement. • Practise maintaining a positive perspective on performance regardless of outcome or circumstance to preserve motivation. • Understand impacts of positive and destructive team functioning, emphasizing the importance of teamwork. |

Key Messages

- Athletes** Maximize learning opportunities in training and competition, and build your belief in your ability to achieve goals. Practise mindfulness; develop your ability to accept the varying thoughts, feelings, and emotions that emerge; and train yourself to maintain optimal focus under any competition conditions.
- Coaches** Continue to focus on the positives and reinforce athletes' readiness for competition. Help them focus on a few personalized process goals for the competition. Continue to be strategic in helping athletes choose competitions that will maximize performance. Make sure athletes avoid mental and emotional burnout by monitoring their mental, emotional, and physical states. Ask them for feedback often, and continue to educate them on the purpose behind the training plan. This enhances their trust, sense of autonomy, and self-determined motivation.
- Parents** As in the previous stage, continue to support and show encouragement for your child. Be mindful of the way you show encouragement and the impact it may have on your child, such as adding performance pressure. Promote positive communication with your child and provide them with the space required before, during, and after a competition. Enjoy celebrating with your child after the event.

Active for Life (Athletes and Participants 12+ years)

ACTIVE FOR LIFE (ATHLETES AND PARTICIPANTS 12+ YEARS)

The Active for Life stage is the final destination of LTAD. Remaining active in sport and physical activity for life is one of the key outcomes of CS4L. In this stage, athletes and participants enjoy lifelong involvement in a variety of competitive and recreational settings. As these recreational athletes typically incorporate principles of physical literacy learned through prior sport participation, they can also adopt mental fitness principles and skills that have been developed throughout their sport experience. With varying levels of prior sport experience, competitiveness, and motives for participation, the mental fitness activities for this stage will fluctuate. Athletes and participants in this stage can refer back to the recommendations provided in the previous stages depending on their needs. In general, we would like to emphasize two mental fitness principles:

- **Goals and perspective:** Participants and athletes should reflect on their goals for participating (e.g. promoting a healthy lifestyle and, social activity, providing a new challenge, or finding an outlet for competitive needs). Engaging in recreational activities can start with a particular goal in mind, but at times, it can morph into a critical evaluation about competence. Maintaining a healthy perspective about sport and physical activity can help promote performance execution, fun, and enjoyment.
- **Sportsmanship:** In recreational sport activities, participants should be mindful of the importance of sportsmanship. Typically, there are varying motives for participating, so it is important to respect individual differences, and not to impose personal agendas on the group.

Active for life can be entered at any age from any stage of development, and can evolve to being Competitive for Life or Fit for Life through all phases of adulthood. Mental fitness principles and skills should continue to be incorporated to help promote a positive experience.

SUMMARY

Mental fitness concepts and strategies can be introduced to athletes at an early age. Initially, this involves instilling foundational principles of attitude, positive focus, and imagination, while emphasizing effort and fun. As athletes progress through the various LTAD stages, mental skills and strategies are introduced and developed to help athletes handle the increasing pressures and demands of competitive sport. The acquisition of mental fitness is a dynamic process that fluctuates depending on

- a) the time and effort put towards developing the mental skills and attributes, and
- b) the athletes openness to self-learning and reflecting on competitive experiences.

In order to provide athletes with the opportunity to reach their personal performance potential, it is imperative that mental fitness be incorporated through their long-term development.

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Other Canadian Sport for Life Resources

canadiansportforlife.ca/resources/ltad-resource-papers

Canadian Sport for Life Resource Paper A Sport Parent's Guide Developing Physical Literacy No Accidental Champions

The Role of Monitoring Growth in Long-Term Athlete Development
Competition is a Good Servant, but a Poor Master
Linking Sport for Life with Management by Values
Maximizing the Sport Experience for our Children
Recovery and Regeneration for Long-Term Athlete Development
The Female Athlete Perspective

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