

## **The Mindset and Tactics of a Champion**

This is one of the most exciting times of the year because the season-ending tournaments are upon us. Every high school athlete is striving to have a peak performance at the regional and state tournaments, while the college guys are looking to turn it up a notch for the Conference and NCAA Championships. I have been attending the NCAA Championships annually since 1982 and the competition is intense. State tournaments are also very exciting! I will be following the success of my summer camp students by attending many different state high school tournaments during February and March and then the Olympic Trials in April.

My most vivid memories from my wrestling career are undoubtedly state, national and Olympic competition. Of course, in order to excel in those events I was wrestling in hundreds of tournaments over two decades. Over 90 percent of what I remember is from the season-ending events. Winning my first State Championship is one of the most intensely satisfying experiences I have ever had on the mats. I was 15 years old, and it was the culmination of a boyhood dream. When I made the Olympic Team I was already an adult. It was definitely very fulfilling, but different from winning my first state championship. I have boxes of memorabilia in my basement, but all I display in my office are the few items with the most significant meaning from the season-ending tournaments.

Towards the end of the season I tell the high school athletes that I work with: "What you achieve at the state tournament will become memories of a lifetime." Over time, no one will remember exactly what your regular season record was. Throughout your life people will ask, "Did you get to state? Did you place? Did you get to NCAA's? Did you place?" These season-ending tournaments are your chance to shine. Make the most of your opportunities! Do not walk off the mat feeling you held anything back. If you give it your all, you will have no regrets regardless of the outcome. Seize the moment! **RISE TO THE OCCASION!**

So how do you "Rise to the Occasion" in your biggest matches? Few athletes perform at the same level in major competition as they do during the season. Unfortunately, many athletes tighten up and hold back. Great champions are able to get the most out of themselves when it counts! Champions perform at their "optimal level of emotional arousal" and do the little things necessary to win the close matches. Below are some simple suggestions, in no particular order, which will help you win your big matches when it counts the most.

Intense drilling will help you perform instinctively in the heat of battle. Fight for every point in the practice room. This scrambling instinct will help you in matches. Always think positively, particularly during the weeks and days leading up to major competition.

Visualize yourself executing your game plan, winning against your toughest competition, and having your hand raised in the championship venue as your cheering section cheers.

Study videotape of some of your best matches. This will help you visualize and think positively. Study video of your toughest potential opponents and picture yourself implementing the game plan you need to defeat these adversaries.

Get proper rest and nutrition. Control your weight so that you can focus on your performance.

Warm up properly before matches. This helps prepare your body for battle, while helping reduce anxiety.

Be intense, yet relaxed, when you step on the mat to do battle! Allow me to elaborate on this key point. Over time, champions learn to develop a routine that allows them to consistently get to their optimal level of mental arousal level prior to matches. This mindset is different for everyone and can change over time. Each athlete is different. Coaches must help athletes identify when they were performing their best and what their mindset was going into the match. Personally, I performed at my best early in high school when I was totally psyched up and attacked my opponent relentlessly. As I matured and faced better competition on national level, I found that I could perform better when I

was a little more relaxed. Don't get me wrong: to be at my best I still had to be intense and focused, but not wound so tight that I did not react quickly or made mistakes.

Control the tempo and ties. The late, great Dave Schultz passed on this little pearl of wisdom to me. I specifically asked Dave when visiting his home in 1986, "Dave, you look so poised out there in competition. What are you thinking?" His response was simply, "I am looking to control the tempo of the match and control the ties."

Dave was a master of the 2 on 1 and front headlock (along with about every other hold, for that matter). When Dave controlled a tie, he could score quickly in a variety of fashions depending on how his opponent reacted.

Use motion and body fakes to control the tempo and/or close the gap. Never stand around. Use body fakes to put your opponent on the defense so you can get a hold of him to control ties. If you like to shoot from the open, use body fakes to set-up a low ankle single or double. Too many athletes stand around and then dive in. No one has executed the low ankle single as well as John Smith. This is because few athletes have trained and conditioned themselves to create the motion that he had. Precise technique, quick level change, and unorthodox flexibility were undoubtedly some of the keys to John's success too. One thing many athletes are lacking is the motion he created. I trained with John at every Olympic & World Team Training Camp from 1984-1992. I speak from personal experience. When he was not moving well, I could stop him with a front headlock. When he was moving intensely, he was practically unstoppable. If you want to get more effective with the low single, create more motion and body fakes.

Keep wrestling through the end of every period. It disgusts me to see wrestlers rest at the ends of periods. This is a great time to score, or at very least, work your opponent's head and wear him down. Never get caught on your heels and scored upon at the end of a period. My athletes often score with the blast double, low single, or snap down during final 15 seconds of period.

Strive to finish every period on top, and definitely not on bottom! I wonder how many wrestlers who get ridden out to the end of a period come back to win? Usually it is far less than 50 percent.

Never relax on the edge. Too many athletes get knocked on their butt on the edge and give up quick points. This is a critical error. I encourage my athletes to wrestle in the center and to know where the edge is. You are much better off if you can see the edge as opposed to having your back to it and being vulnerable. Wrestlers should circle in immediately when pushed near the edge.

Stay focused no matter what happens. Too many athletes get visibly frustrated if they make a mistake or get a bad call. Do not do this! Get right back in there and keep plugging away to score and win.

Believe in yourself no matter what happens. You must believe you can win when you step on the mat as well as when you fall behind. Never doubt yourself. Remember McIlravy's comeback victory in the NCAA Finals his freshman year.

Be tough when you are tired! I tell my athletes this often. We can talk technique and tactics, but when it comes down to it, you must execute your technique and tactics during the final moments and seconds of close matches if you are going to reach your highest goals. Learning and understanding the game will only benefit you if you have pushed yourself to higher mental and physical thresholds daily throughout the season.

Once your season is over, assess what you need to do to improve. Make and follow a training plan that will allow you to live your dreams.