

Mental Toughness Tips For Wrestlers

Congratulations! You've taken the first step toward becoming a better prepared, mentally tougher wrestler than you might be at the present time. This free report was written with youth and high school wrestlers in mind and draws from my experience and insights gained while being associated with the sport of wrestling for over 40 years. It is designed to assist the development of mentally tough, confident wrestlers and help them succeed in what I feel is the greatest sport known to mankind! I hope you enjoy the report!

Your goal every time you step on the mat, whether it is in practice or in actual competition, is to be mentally ready to wrestle in a highly focused manner. You've probably heard your coaches state that how will "wrestle in matches as you wrestle in practice", or words to that effect. Your coach is right, and while we are focusing on pre-match mental preparation – specifically the period of time after the weigh-in and prior to you stepping on the mat to wrestle – you must realize that your performance as a competition wrestler is always a direct reflection of your performance as a practice wrestler. You need to know that effective pre-match mental preparation will not overcome prior laziness in practice or other aspects of your wrestling training, conditioning, etc. In fact, the knowledge that you have worked hard in practice, both during the season and the off-season, is a huge factor in feeling self-confident about your abilities and contributes greatly to effective pre-match mental preparation.

Being mentally prepared when you step out on the match during dual meet or tournament competition should be the goal of every wrestler. I'm talking specifically about the time between when you weigh in and when you report to the scorer's table for your match. While most wrestlers understand the importance of physically warming up right before a match, fewer understand how critical it is to conduct an effective "mental warm up". Those who do understand this know that not only does the body need to be warmed up, muscles ready to exert force, heart rate elevated to get the blood pumping, etc. – but the mind needs to get fully prepared to "go to war". I think you'll agree that all else being equal among two wrestlers at the beginning of a wrestling match – the one who is most mentally prepared to "leave everything on the mat" is usually the wrestler that wins the match.

I've been around wrestling for over 40 years and I can state without reservation that over 75% of the wrestlers I observe at the youth and high school level sabotage themselves with ineffective or even damaging pre-match preparation. Many focus too much on the various things associated with "what if I lose this match?" and are already worried about what their coaches, their dad, brother, teammates, etc., will say to them or think about them. In other words – at the time when they are supposed to be thinking positive thoughts focused on winning the match, they are already preparing to deal with the aftermath of losing it! You don't need to be a psychiatrist to understand that if the human mind is focused on "damage control" – how you're going to deal

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with losing a wrestling match, it cannot focus on winning the match, which leaves the wrestler unprepared mentally to perform at a high level.

If you speak with a wrestler who has upset a highly seeded, top ranked or “big name” wrestler and they will almost always tell you that they stepped out on the mat knowing that they could win and that they had mentally prepared by focusing on exerting all of their energy and skill during the match – in other words they believed they could win the match (even if others did not) and they psyched themselves up to the point where they had promised themselves that win or lose – they were going to “let it all out” and wrestle hard for a full six minutes. Often, wrestlers who do this and “prepare for combat” catch more accomplished wrestlers off guard and this is one reason there will always be “upsets” in wrestling. Remember – the best wrestler doesn’t always win the match – the one that “wrestles best” during the match does!

The Five Major Causes of Pre-Match Anxiety

I could write volumes on the various pre-match mental challenges that wrestlers have to deal with prior to competing, but I think I’ve written enough to get you to understand that without proper focus and pre-match prep, you can sabotage your chances of winning by not training your mind to focus on winning, following the match strategy your coach has discussed with you and establishing a mental state that makes you determined to “leave it all on the mat” during the upcoming match.

My observations of wrestlers, gained from over four decades of being in the sport as a youth wrestler, high school and NCAA Division I competitor, have enabled me to narrow the sources of pre-match anxiety affecting wrestlers to five major categories or factors.

1. They focus on the what might happen if they lose the the match:
 - “What if I lose?”
 - “What will Dad say to me?”
 - “Will Coach be mad at me?”
 - “What will my girlfriend think?”
 - And many other negative thoughts.
2. **They fail to “lock down” their mind:** Often wrestlers are thinking about or even discussing with their friends, family, girlfriend, etc. about where they are going to eat after the dual meet or tournament, social events, and other things totally unrelated to the task at hand – winning a wrestling match that is about to start!

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3. **They fear failure:** Wrestlers focused on the negatives associated with losing a match are practically guaranteeing that they will indeed lose the match.
4. **Excessive worry about what others will think of them:** Instead of being focused on winning an upcoming match, wrestlers too often have great anxiety on what other people will think about them if they lose the match or don't perform well. And these wrestlers will tell you that they often find themselves thinking about this during the match instead of focusing on scoring points against their opponent!
5. **They lack confidence:** This is very common and I think it is because all wrestlers truly know if they have done everything they could have done prior to the match to prepare physically, technique-wise, etc. In other words, if a wrestler knows he's been taking shortcuts in practice, hasn't worked hard during conditioning, etc., this will usually cause self-doubt and before long the mind starts making excuses or reasons why winning the match is unlikely or even impossible.

If you identify with any of these pre-match challenges, you can benefit from more structured and focused mental preparations. Obviously, the time period after the weigh-in is the best time to mentally prepare yourself for combat (that's right – wrestling is a combat sport!) and eliminate doubt, anxiety, tension, and at the same time elevating your confidence, composure, and trust in your technique and knowledge of “what needs to be done” once out on the mat.

The Five Steps to Effective Pre-Match Mental Preparation

I have interacted with many wrestlers over the past four decades and my observations during this time have enabled me to refine what needs to be done during effective pre-match mental preparation to five major steps. Realize that each wrestler is somewhat unique and based on the personality, maturity level, etc., these five steps can be modified, prioritized, etc., to fit the needs of any individual.

1. Eliminate Pressure By Managing Expectations: Many wrestlers harm their chances of winning by setting expectations that are unrealistic or unnecessary. Often, wrestlers focus on pinning or tech-falling their opponent instead of simply focusing on winning the match. This is critical – focus on winning the match – vice scoring a certain number of points, pinning the opponent or even using specific techniques. If you focus on winning, it enables you to be more flexible minded during a match and “find ways to win” instead of focusing on winning in a certain way or by using certain techniques.

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2. **Give Yourself Reasons For Being Confident:** If you listened to your coaches and have put in the off season work, have trained hard during the season, are in shape and are technically sharp – you can reflect on this during the pre-match period and it will bolster your confidence as you realize that you have indeed done everything possible to prepare to win the upcoming match. The knowledge that you've done everything your coaches have asked you to do and that you've sacrificed to make weight, stay conditioned, etc., is very powerful and it enables you “to believe yourself” when you are psyching yourself up prior to a match

3. **Focus Only On the Next Match:** If you can “put a fence around your mind” and focus solely on the upcoming match, your chances of winning increase greatly. Instead of worrying about what your dad is thinking, social events that may be happening after the match or during the weekend, school related projects, homework, etc. – you should “lock down” your mind and allow no thoughts into it while you are laser focused on the match you are about to wrestle. The best wrestlers will tell you that they never think about anything else prior to a match, but the match itself. This is especially true in tournaments, when wrestlers are often thinking of who they are going to have to wrestle in the semi-finals, finals, etc., and they lose sight of the fact that they actually have to win their next match to get into the semi-finals! Never look past your next match and do not allow yourself to have any thoughts about anything not related to that match.

4. **Have confidence in your training:** As you prepare for the upcoming match, it is very beneficial to reflect on your training and all that you've done up to this point to learn technique, gain experience by wrestling during the off season, weight training, running, making weight, etc. Knowing you have truly put in the time and effort to excel at your sport is a huge motivator when mentally preparing for a match – it breeds confidence and allows a wrestler to reflect on all of his past work and sacrifice and to realize that he is indeed well prepared and ready to compete at a high level during the upcoming match.

5. **Expect Tension and Deal With It Effectively:** The pre-match period can be stressful for wrestlers and any wrestler who says he feels no apprehension, nervousness or “jitters” prior to a match is likely not telling the truth or simply doesn't realize that he is actually experiencing some degree of these symptoms, but has learned to effectively deal with them, to the point that he no longer notices them. Humans react to the thought of a pending battle, fight or other form of conflict with physiological and mental responses. In other words, if you are properly preparing for wrestling match, your brain will elevate adrenalin levels in your body, which may cause you to be somewhat “jittery” or nervous, incapable of sitting still, thirsty, etc. Know that these reactions (and several others) are typical and can be expected prior to any match. As in anything else in wrestling, proper study and preparation to deal with pre-match tension and nervousness can allow you to deal with it as effectively as when your coach shows you a counter to a specific takedown, etc – once mastered, the counter can often make it literally impossible for most

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wrestlers to score on you using the technique. Learning how to cope with the inevitable pre-match jitters is the same – expect it, study how it affects you personally and use your intelligence to devise ways to eliminate it from your pre-match preparations!

How To Deal With Pre-Match Tension

As previously stated, human beings react in various ways to the awareness that “a fight is about to happen”, and without exception, the brain initiates certain physiological responses, such as the elevation of adrenalin excretion, increased heart rate, etc. In other words, when your brain tells your body that it is about to engage in battle, the body responds in a predictable way, without fail. This is the *SCIENCE* associated with pre-match tension or jitters, as some people call them. The *ART* of dealing with these predictable physiological reactions and their affect on a wrestler’s pre-match state of mind is in how a wrestler copes with these reactions prior to a match and how he manages to negate the negatives effects of them, and perhaps even redirect them in a positive manner! This is achieved by first understanding the reactions of the human body to pre-combat stressors and then utilizing various mental preparation techniques to shut out the negative effects of the predictable reactions by the body and mind. This will allow you to focus on harnessing the positive effects and directing them toward helping you step out on the mat with a fully engaged, highly focused “warrior’s mindset” that has shut out all distractions and is focused on nothing more than three two minute periods of “a fight with rules”, which is really what amateur wrestling is!

There are positive aspects of pre-match tension and they can be used to your benefit. If you are truly a competitor, the fact that you know a match is coming up and that you will soon become a “gladiator” doing battle in an arena before hundreds or thousands of fans will undoubtedly prompt positive thoughts in your mind and you’ll view the upcoming battle (wrestling match) in a very positive way. The fact that you get to do this along with your teammates, many of whom you’ve known since you were very young, wrestling in youth programs, makes the entire competition even more appealing to many wrestlers. Being able to perform in front of family and friends is yet another motivating factor that many wrestlers use to psych themselves up prior to a match, and they view the opportunity to show off a bit in a very positive light and this helps them become very eager to “get it on” during the next few hours or so. All of these factors, and many more, can help a wrestler become highly focused on the positive aspects of the match or matches that are about to happen.

Of course, some of the physical reactions your body has toward pending combat – elevated heart rate and blood pressure, sweating, increased thirst, frequent need to urinate, tense muscles, etc., can produce negative effects on a wrestler’s pre-match state of mind if he allows them to do so.

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Along with these physical reactions come predictable mental reactions, such as dwelling on fear of losing, fear of embarrassing yourself in front of your family, girlfriend, coach, teammates, etc.

Obviously, you want to develop the ability to focus on the positive aspects of pre-match tension and turn this into a weapon that enables you to think only good things about wrestling, the match ahead of you, your prior training and conditioning and everything else that will allow you to “talk to yourself” and reflect on how well prepared you are for this match and how you have every reason to expect to do well while on the mat.

I have interviewed many top level college wrestlers and they all say the same thing – that during pre-match mental preparations against the very best wrestlers in the nation, they reflect on how much they’ve done to get to this point...the sacrifices that they’ve made...the years of training and preparation they’ve put in...how they are fully equipped to beat their opponent and that...

THEY DESERVE TO WIN THIS MATCH...

...and will do so if they focus on...

...WRESTLING HARD DURING EVERY SECOND OF ALL 3 PERIODS!

This thought process leads these top level wrestlers to enter a match against another top ranked opponent...

EXPECTING TO WIN

and...

REFUSING TO ACCEPT ANYTHING LESS THAN VICTORY!

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The 5 Things That Nearly All NCAA Champions Do Prior To A Match

I have observed countless NCAA champions and All-Americans during my time in the sport of wrestling, and I have always tried to see what they do from a technique, conditioning, preparation, etc., standpoint. Upon reflection of what I have observed over the years, I can narrow the pre-match actions they take down to five major things. Realize that while each individual may do something differently than others, my point is that almost all of the champions I have observed execute the following actions in some form or another. Learning what these champions do can be very beneficial to you and these techniques can be effective at every level of wrestling.

1. **They Insulate themselves from distractions:** These wrestlers often cut off all contact, conversations with parents, friends, girlfriends, etc., a couple of hours prior to a match. They often isolate themselves in a different part of the arena or gym and avoid socializing and anything else that distracts them from thinking only about their next match. This enables them to focus on the upcoming match without having to respond to questions or participate in conversations with others. This is a superb technique and I recommend that you find some variation of it for your pre-match routine.
2. **They listen to music to calm their nerves and inspire them:** Most top wrestlers utilize an iPod or other small device that enables them to listen to music that calms their nerves, inspires them, etc. One NCAA champion told me that he listened to selected songs from the soundtrack of the movie “Gladiator” because he viewed himself as a gladiator and the music inspired him. He also told me that as he ran into the arena toward the elevated mat for his Division I finals match, he imagined that he was in Rome running into the famed Coliseum in front of thousands of fans and that like the ancient gladiators who knew they had to win to survive, he convinced himself that he was in a battle for survival and that he had to wrestle his finals match as if his life depended upon him winning it. He did win his finals match – against an opponent who had previously beaten him during the regular season. So, find some music that calms you, inspires you and “insulates” you from distractions during you pre-match mental preparation.
3. **They have a set pre-match routine:** The most successful competitors have an established routine they follow beginning at the weigh in and until they walk on the mat to wrestle. Many eat the same type of food and drink the same drinks – knowing that their body has responded well to this post-weigh in meal in the past and that they won’t feel sluggish or bloated while warming up or wrestling. They also have a set routine for physically warming up – often performing specific exercises and stretches in a set sequence, duration, number of reps, etc. Some also use a drilling partner they have

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become used to and they execute a prescribed number of selected takedowns, top and bottom techniques, etc., during their warm up.

4. They start the match fully warmed up – to include elevated heart rate and a light sweat: If you’ve ever watched a professional boxing match or mixed martial arts fight – you’ll notice that almost all of the competitors warm up to the point that they are already sweating prior to the start of the match. This enables them to be physically ready to engage in flurries, scrambles, etc., that often occur right from the start of the match. In other words, they realize that they need to be ready to let it all hang out against an opponent who is trying to end the fight within the first minute or so and when this happens – you don’t have time to warm up during the match! Take a lesson here from these competitors both professional and amateur – the very best wrestlers ALWAYS have a pre-match warm up that leaves them fully warmed up and sweating. This produces a body that is ready to face any threat thrown at it during the early stages of a match and it also provides a great deal of self-confidence to a wrestler, knowing that should an “ambush” come his way at the onset of the match, his “engine” is fully warmed up and ready to operate at the highest RPM’s!
5. They stay hydrated: This is an often overlooked aspect of dealing with pre-match tension and stress. Your body’s instinctive reaction to the stress of an upcoming fight will usually include greater frequency of urination, which will rob the body of necessary fluid. Additionally, the warm up, if done well, will result in some degree of sweating and this water must be replaced. The worst thing you can do is start a wrestling match, especially one that is going to be a tough contest, with reduced hydration levels. It is beyond doubt that a body that is lacking its “full tank” of water will inevitably fail or underperform during high level competition. This is especially true during tournaments, where you will often wrestle five matches strung out over a 8-12 hour period. It is easy to become dehydrated during these prolonged competitions and you should develop a system that requires you to drink at least one or two 12 ounce bottles of water per hour, etc. Stay hydrated!

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How To Win Against Superior Opponents - Performing Your Best When You Are Outmatched

Competitiveness is a quality that all champion athletes possess – they simply love to win and this drives them to succeed. However, a strong competitive drive can work against some athletes because even with the smallest of failures or setbacks – they lose confidence, become frustrated with themselves, and lose motivation.

All top level wrestlers are driven to win and the mere thought of losing a match is distasteful to them. These athletes are often fueled more by a hatred of losing than a love of winning, and this can sometimes work against them when they are matched against a wrestler who is simply better than them. Often, when facing a top tier opponent, other top level wrestlers begin doubting their ability to win, especially if they have previously lost to the opponent or if the opponent is a “big name” wrestler that has a reputation for being unbeatable, etc.

Many of the very best wrestlers can fall victim to self-doubt in such a situation and he can literally “talk himself out of winning” a match that he actually had the ability to win if he was properly focused mentally and physically.

Fortunately, many elite wrestlers have devised techniques and methods to gain a mental edge when they are facing an opponent that by all measurement is better than they are and is the clear favorite to win. The best news is that the things that elite wrestlers do to hone their mental toughness to a heightened state when facing a superior opponent can be used at every level of wrestling – from youth level to high school wrestling and beyond.

It is important that you learn how to remain focused on proper mental preparation when you are about to wrestle against an opponent that is more experienced and more proficient than you are. Rather than dwell on the fact that you are overmatched, have less experience or aren't as strong or as fast as your opponent, you can home in on several thoughts that can slowly, but surely breed confidence in your mind that if you can avoid being taken down in the first period, or if you can keep within 3 points of your opponent at the end of the second period, etc. – that there's a chance that you could pull off an upset. Whatever it is (scoring, not being scored upon, avoiding an opponent's better moves, etc) that you and your coaches decide to focus on during the match – the fact is that if you get your mind believing that if you manage to do what your coaches are advising you to do – **YOU WILL HAVE A CHANCE AT VICTORY!**

Once you believe you can actually beat a superior opponent if certain things happen (or don't happen, in some situations) your entire approach to a match becomes one that is focused on winning vice trying not to lose. Reflect in what I just wrote in the previous sentence – there is a huge difference in the mind-set of a wrestler who is Trying To Win and one who is Trying Not

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To Lose. The wrestlers that pull off upsets when facing superior opponents were able to talk themselves into **TAKING ACTION** when opportunities appeared and they **SCORED POINTS** instead of waiting passively for the “superior wrestler” to shoot on them or attempt an offensive move that would cause them to continually remain on the defensive and rob them of the “attacker’s advantage”.

Here are some of the techniques used by top level wrestlers to mentally prepare for situations when they are facing the toughest opponents.

Acknowledge that You Are “Going To War”: You have to acknowledge that you are about to engage in a tough battle against a very skilled opponent and that by most criteria, you are not favored to win this battle. By accepting this mentally, you begin to overlook the fact that winning this match will require you to perform at “personal best” levels of skill, strength, endurance and technique – and you will be able to better focus on what you actually have to execute from a strategy and tactics standpoint to defeat your opponent. Remember – if you think you have a chance at winning this match – you do have a chance – so get your mind wrapped around the fact that you’re about to participate in the toughest match of your career to date – and that you’re ready to throw everything you have physically and mentally at your opponent.

Have a Match Strategy and Execute It: Talk to your coaches and seek their advice. They will likely know your opponent (he’s a big name guy, right?!) and his style of wrestling, favorite moves, etc. Together, devise a game plan, period by period, of what you need to do to avoid his strengths and maximize your chances at scoring on him. Most coaches know what to tell you to do and the best coaches will actually state which techniques you should focus on in order to deny the opponent the use of his favorite moves, etc.

For example, I once observed a nationally famous high school coach talking to one of his wrestlers prior to his state finals match. His wrestler had lost to his finals opponent the previous week by a score of 10-2 and had repeatedly taken him down with double leg shots. This coach advised his wrestler (Wrestler A) to tie up quickly with his opponent (Wrestler B), dig into underhooks and despite this being a folkstyle match – he told his wrestler to “Wrestle Greco for the first period. Keep him tied up defending your underhooks and don’t let him get space between you so he can shoot his double leg”.

Wrestler A executed his coach’s advice and he frustrated his opponent by “wrestling upper body” and denying him the space he needed to get his double leg shot. Frustrated by not being able to score on an opponent he’d easily taken down the week before, Wrestler B took a terrible, sloppy shot near the end of the first period and Wrestler B spun around him for a two point lead at buzzer. Wrestler A chose the neutral position at the start of the second period and continued to execute his coach’s strategy. Once again Wrestler B could not avoid the constant pressure and

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crowding Wrestler A was putting on him and he attempted another sloppy double leg, which Wrestler A countered with a “pancake” – scoring 5 points and ending the second period with a 7-0 lead.

In the third period, Wrestler B was clearly panicked by the fact that he was losing badly to someone he’d easily beaten the week before. He chose the bottom position and Wrestler A, on the direction of his coach, cut him in order to get back to the neutral position and once again, he “wrestled Greco” against his opponent. Distracted by the score and the fact that time was running out, Wrestler B started trying to wrestle upper body in search of a big move that could put Wrestler A to his back.

With less than a minute to go in the match, he pushed into Wrestler A trying to dig his own underhooks and possibly get a bear hug on his opponent. Wrestler A was actually an accomplished upper body wrestler and promptly headlocked Wrestler B for five points and a 12-1 victory in the state finals!

Wrestler A wasn’t supposed to win this match – but he went into it believing he could and he listened to his coaches’ advice. He whipped what many felt was a superior wrestler – **BECAUSE HE HAD CONVINCED HIMSELF THAT HE COULD WIN THE MATCH!**

Stick To The Plan: As described above, you should get with your coach and devise a strategy for the match. Go over it with your coach to ensure that you fully understand it and mentally rehearse the strategy over and over until you know exactly what you are going to do once the match starts. Having a teammate drill the strategy with you, with him acting like your opponent, is a perfect way to refine the strategy and I recommend that you do this right up until it is time for you to step on the mat for the match (this can also serve as your warm up). Once the whistle blows and the match begins, you must remember to “stick to the plan” and keep battling for the entire match. Remember the old adage that “Wrestlers that don’t stop moving have a habit of scoring points” – **KEEP MOVING AND STICK TO THE PLAN!**

We hope you’ve enjoyed this collection of mental toughness and mental preparation tips. Feel free to print copies and distribute them among your friends and teammates. By signing up for our newsletter, you’ll be receiving similar articles, reports and tips that focus on various wrestling topics, with a special emphasis on the mental toughness and self-confidence aspects of our great sport.