High school student-athletes spend a great deal of time in their sport environment during the academic year, with some sports also training throughout summer break in order to prepare for the season. Therefore, these athletes spend a great deal of time with teammates and coaches, all of whom can potentially influence the lives of the athletes. High school coaches, in particular, interact with their athletes during a crucial developmental stage and may be instrumental in teaching and shaping athletes’ mental toughness, as some researchers have suggested that mental toughness may be a life skill that can be learned (Gould, Griffes, & Carson,
This article further explains how high school coaches can foster mental toughness, specifically through implementation in practice and their interactions with athletes. The following recommendations are made based in part by our discussions with high school coaches on how they develop mental toughness at their competitive level. These strategies center on 1) coaching environment/communication, 2) mental components, and 3) instruction and drilling.

Coaches and Mental Toughness

Mental toughness (MT) had been defined as, “a collection of values, attitudes, behaviors, and emotions that enable you to persevere and overcome any obstacle, adversity, or pressure experienced, but also maintain concentration and motivation when things are going well to consistently achieve your goals” (Gucciardi, Gordon, & Dimmock, 2008, p. 278). Understanding MT can aid coaches and athletes in maintaining a level of consistency and drive to achieve goals created as a team and individuals. In sport, coaches play a vital role in shaping athletes’ sporting attitudes, competence, and performance (Chelladurai, 2007). Additionally, high school coaches face the challenge of molding their athletes at a critical developmental stage (Kendellen & Camiré, 2015). At the adolescent stages, coaches have the potential to shape athletes’ physical, social, cognitive, and psychological development for future growth (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). Athletes at this age are pliable and capable of being shaped and influenced by adult figures. Since high school athletes spend a great deal of time with their team and coaches during their athletic careers, coaches play a vital role in developing and maintaining MT in these athletes (Connaughton, Wadey, Hanton, & Jones, 2008). High school coaches have explained various approaches, ranging from coaching environment to specific drills in practice, that they implement in order to promote the growth of MT within their teams (Madrigal & Vargas, 2019). Coaches can incorporate the tactics of a positive coaching environment, facilitating effective communication, and instilling mental skills into practices and team culture to create and develop MT within their teams.

Coaching Environment/Communication

The coaching environment plays a major part in the development of players and can have an immense impact on MT development. The environment can be shaped through a strong coaching philosophy, modeling desired behaviors, inclusion of outside sport activities, and incorporating physical and mental breaks throughout the season.

The coaching environment plays a major part in the development of players and can have an immense impact on MT development. The environment can be shaped through a strong coaching philosophy, modeling desired behaviors, inclusion of outside sport activities, and incorporating physical and mental breaks throughout the season.
rapport with athletes to gain trusting relationships is the next important step in MT development. One particular aspect discussed by previous coaches is the emphasis on player development over outcome of coaches’ success. This creates a positive environment and allows athletes to feel cared for and more willing to comply with the demands and expectations of the team (Gucciardi, Gordon, Dimmock, & Mallett, 2009). This can be as simple as confirming athletes understand skills or drills by having them repeat back instructions or given the opportunity to ask clarifying questions. It can also be coaches taking time to meet with athletes to create individual goals for the season, and have check-ins throughout the season to track their development both mentally and physically. Figure 1 demonstrates an example guideline for check-in meetings. Another strategy for creating this desired environment can be to schedule team bonding, such as dinners or other fun activities outside of sport in order for the coach to know their players as people outside of sport. In addition, acknowledging when physical and mental breaks from sport are needed, especially after strenuous or demanding practices or tough games, can be helpful for recovering and refocusing that will aid in maintenance of MT. If athletes look sluggish or distracted, this may be an indication a mental or physical break is needed. This would be a good time for the coach to do a team check-in about how they feel, rather than getting upset or frustrated with the team. These breaks can incorporate fun activities such as team-building games, relaxation as a guided strategy for easing tension or stress, or giving extra time for stretching recovery. Team-building games can be a beneficial strategy to ease the mind while having fun to connect with teammates and coaches and recharge focus. The games can be high energy, centered on teamwork, and include competition to maintain a competitive atmosphere. Relaxation can be beneficial for resting the body to subsequently relax the mind. In addition, allowing athletes to stretch or recover after drills for longer can be a simple strategy that can give athletes time to restore energy to push through. The environment in which coaches create affects the culture of the team and expectations for players. Establishing this environment from the beginning will only help the team cultivate MT earlier in the season and maintain it.

**Communication**

Communication can go a long way with helping athletes develop MT. A coach’s role includes the ability to articulate and communicate effectively and can play a role in players’ development of mental toughness (Gucciardi et al., 2009). Therefore, to ensure a trusting and respectful relationship, a coach should focus on keeping an open line of communication with the player to help them reach their potential, as well as help facilitate MT. The relationship between a player and a coach can vary, but with frequent communication and positive encouragement, a mutually exclusive relationship can unfold. Having honest conversations with athletes individually will provide the attention players need and give athletes the autonomy for discussing performance competencies. It is important to discuss progress throughout various points in the season to deemphasize mistakes and focus on reactions and growth.

![Figure 1. Example of player development check-ins.](image-url)
cussing performance competencies. It is important to discuss progress throughout various points in the season to de-emphasize mistakes and focus on reactions and growth.

Examples of this can be filling out worksheets with the athletes on controllables in the sport or simulating potential scenarios of mistakes and having the athletes respond to those mistakes. In addition, if athletes make mistakes in practice, asking questions about better ways to perform skills or more effective decisions will stimulate critical thinking and independence. The way in which a coach leads their team has been shown to indirectly affect athletes' MT through the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Mahoney, Gucciardi, Ntoumanis, & Mallet, 2014). Autonomy-supportive environments are ideal coaching climates for athletes looking to take their play to the next level. Coaches can incorporate certain strategies, such as giving athletes the freedom to decide between activities, creating a comfortable line of communication for athletes to feel respected and validated, and permit athletes to take on the responsibility of leadership roles for energy regulation, self-motivation, and team accountability, in order to provide athletes with the autonomy to make decisions and think critically on their own.

**Mental Components**

In order to enhance mental toughness, coaches can also incorporate mental preparation into training. Mental skills, such as imagery, breathing and goal setting, have been linked to mental and physical success in high-intensity sports (Birrer & Morgan, 2010). Introducing these skills at the high school level will be beneficial for solidifying the techniques as the athletes develop throughout their 4 years.

Elite athletes have been found to utilize mental skills to not only enhance their performance but also facilitate and maintain MT. Psychological skills need to be continually practiced, which takes time, effort and energy, in order to be most effective and beneficial to performance (Connaughton et al., 2008). Therefore, coaches making time throughout training for practicing mental skills can be beneficial for development of MT. Table 1 explains potential strategies for implementing mental preparation into practice. At the high school level, many teams practice every day, thus coaches can utilize time within each practice or week to dedicate to mental skills training. Yet the introduction of the skills will most likely come from coaches, because mental skills consultants at the high school level may be a scarce resource. If coaches are looking for mental skills consultants to work with their team, they can research local universities with sport psychology programs and inquire about advisors and/or graduate students to provide services. If coaches are looking for someone with certification, they can find a certified mental performance consultant on the Association for Applied Sport Psychology website. Consultants can provide varying services, from weekly sessions, to workshops, to education sessions. Ultimately, the coach can decide how to access these services.

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services and tools. Coaches can attend clinics, read books, or ask a mental skills consultant to educate and train them on mental skills to ensure the appropriate skills are being taught to the athletes. For example, breathing can be a skill that coaches can easily learn to incorporate within their own teams. Beginning practice with breathing allows athletes to utilize the technique as a focus mechanism, while incorporating imagery to visualize focus being inhaled and distractions leaving the mind as they exhale. Teaching the appropriate breathing techniques at the beginning of the season can also aid athletes in maintaining composure during critical moments of competition. Practicing the mental skill of visualization or imagery at training can help athletes physically develop a skill as they learn new techniques in their sport (Munroe-Chandler, Hall, Fishburne, Murphy, & Hall, 2012). They can also visualize themselves being successful and reacting to various mistakes to handle them more appropriately. Coaches can research scripts for their sport or ask a mental skills consultant to personalize a script for their team that they, as coaches, can read to their athletes to integrate this skill. One of the biggest key points is that coaches need to routinely practice and emphasize mental skills training with their team. Showing athletes they are willing to try skills, bring in a mental skills consultant to teach skills, or communicate that they have been trained with the skills themselves can help athletes’ willingness to incorporate the skills. In addition, regularly applying positive self-talk into preparation can be beneficial for increasing an athlete’s self-confidence and decreasing anxiety (Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos, Mpoumpaki, & Theodorakis, 2009). Having athletes create organic and personal self-talk phrases can help during moments of doubt and can steer the athletes toward a more positive outlook on themselves and the situation. Another mental skill that coaches can incorporate is goal setting. Goal setting as a team and as individuals can aid in mental preparation because the team sets expectations and can hold each other accountable throughout the season. With regular practice and implementation of mental skills, coaches can provide their athletes with more chances to further develop their MT, especially at this level.

Instruction and Drilling

Athletes have been programmed at a young age to practice physical skills to improve performance in order to be elite players. Yet coaches can incorporate specific mental drills that can also improve performance through mental training. Simulating adversity, creating a “one more” mentality, and holding athletes accountable are all ways coaches can cultivate MT in their athletes.

Creating adversity in practice can help athletes gain confidence, physically and mentally prepare for potential adversity in matches, and be comfortable in various situations. In fact, creating challenging practices and environments has been a strategy found in research to develop mental toughness in various athletic populations (Connaughton, Hanton, & Jones, 2010; Cook, Crust, Littlewood, Nesti, & Allen-Collinson, 2014; Driska, Kamphoff, & Armentrout, 2012). If athletes are introduced to adversity in practice through high intensity drills, conditioning, and so on, when they face similar hardship in competition, they will be equipped with the skills to control the situation and handle it more appropriately. This is only possible if coaches had first established a positive coaching environment and open lines of communication with their athletes so athletes feel supported during these challenging practices. According to elite coaches, training environments should be continuously challenging and incorporating pressures from game-like experiences (Gucciardi et al., 2009). A coach should always be pushing the players’ limits to demonstrate their ability to be resilient and succeed during stress-inducing situations, while adhering to the coaching philosophy to create the desired environment and keep the effective communication within the team to further build MT. Developing a calendar of challenges each week can help keep athletes involved and hungry to succeed. Challenges may include conditioning after practice to create that “one-more” mindset when the athletes are tired, scrimmages to simulate game situations, and partner or group drills to increase competition. Coaches have the freedom to decide how to challenge their athletes in a beneficial and constructive manner to reach desired results within sport and the mental game.

Conclusion

The development of mental toughness at the high school level revolves around the coach. Coaches interact with athletes at a pliable developmental period and therefore can further develop their mental toughness through their coaching environments, communication styles, mental components, and physical training. Creating a positive environment while incorporating a competitive nature that encourages MT development through drills, challenging situations, or mental preparation are necessary to maintain MT (Weinberg, Butt, & Culp, 2011). In order to develop MT in high school athletes, coaches must look at themselves first to determine how to effectively instruct and guide their teams. In addition, these strategies can also stimulate coaching education and training. If coaches are taught to construct and uphold a strong coaching philosophy, and even do self-check-ins to monitor the growth and projection of their philosophy, they can determine if MT is developing. In addition, coaches can expand knowledge of sport and player development through reading and attending coaching classes. Focusing coaching seminars on coaching environment, communication, specific instruction and drilling, and mental skills to be centered on MT development will help educate coaches on how to foster this skill within athletes. Knowing this information, organizations can develop application-based training to help coaches effectively facilitate MT development. It is important for coaches to continually seek education and training opportunities to maintain a strong knowledge of the advancements in sport along with new strategies to fos-
Focusing coaching seminars on coaching environment, communication, specific instruction and drilling, and mental skills to be centered on MT development will help educate coaches on how to foster this skill within athletes.

References


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