

A WINNER'S

Mental fortitude. A fighter strengthens his body, but what about his mind? When a fighter is about to go up against a reigning champion, his mind could start telling him that his opponent is impossible to beat—and when his brain doesn't believe he can win, his body gives up, too. Conversely, a fighter with mental fortitude who believes he'll win will have a better chance at accomplishing that goal.

There are ways to achieve the strong mindset required to defeat the reigning champ (or any worthy opponent).

"If you ask athletes how much of their sport performance is influenced by their mindset, they will typically tell you 90 to 99.9 percent," says Caroline Silby, Ph.D., a Washington, D.C.-based sports psychologist. "Then ask athletes how much time each day do they spend working on their mindset, and they will laugh as they probably spend about zero to five percent of their time actually doing it."

Athletes know their minds are critical to their results, but they spend little time strengthening this aspect of their training.

"It can actually be quite challenging to know how to go about working on your attitude to secure the win," Silby says. "There is also a difference between understanding what you need to do and actually making those behaviors habits."

Every fighter has his own routine to physically prepare for a match. Here are some brain-boosting habits to add to that routine. Silby says that these 10 mental skills have helped athletes to respond to cues that facilitate high-level performance.

Who doesn't want that?

Metal focus is critical in on-the-ground chess matches, like this one between Josh Thomson and Nate Diaz.

1. Set Goals When going up against the reigning champion, athletes often mistakenly focus solely on outcome goals (the win) with little thought given to the specific performance level needed, Silby says.

"An athlete's attention needs to be primarily on the task goals," she notes. "These involve actions the athlete commits to executing with 100 percent commitment and intention. If an athlete executes the tasks, he has the best chance of securing the win."

2. Follow Routines Pre- and post-performance routines simplify execution and eliminate questions and indecision by helping athletes remain focused on controllable aspects of performance, Silby says.

"Challengers very often get sidetracked by the 'TBUs,' which stands for 'true but useless pieces of information.' An example

of a TBU is the fact that the reigning champion may have been unstoppable the last few matches," she says. "While this is a true piece of information, it's actually useless to the

challenger because regardless of this TBU, there remain positive actions the challenger must take to give him the best chance of fighting at the top of his game."

3. Regulate Emotions Practicing mindfulness (for instance, being in the present moment and accepting of thoughts and feelings) and using your emotions as informational feedback is essential to top performance.

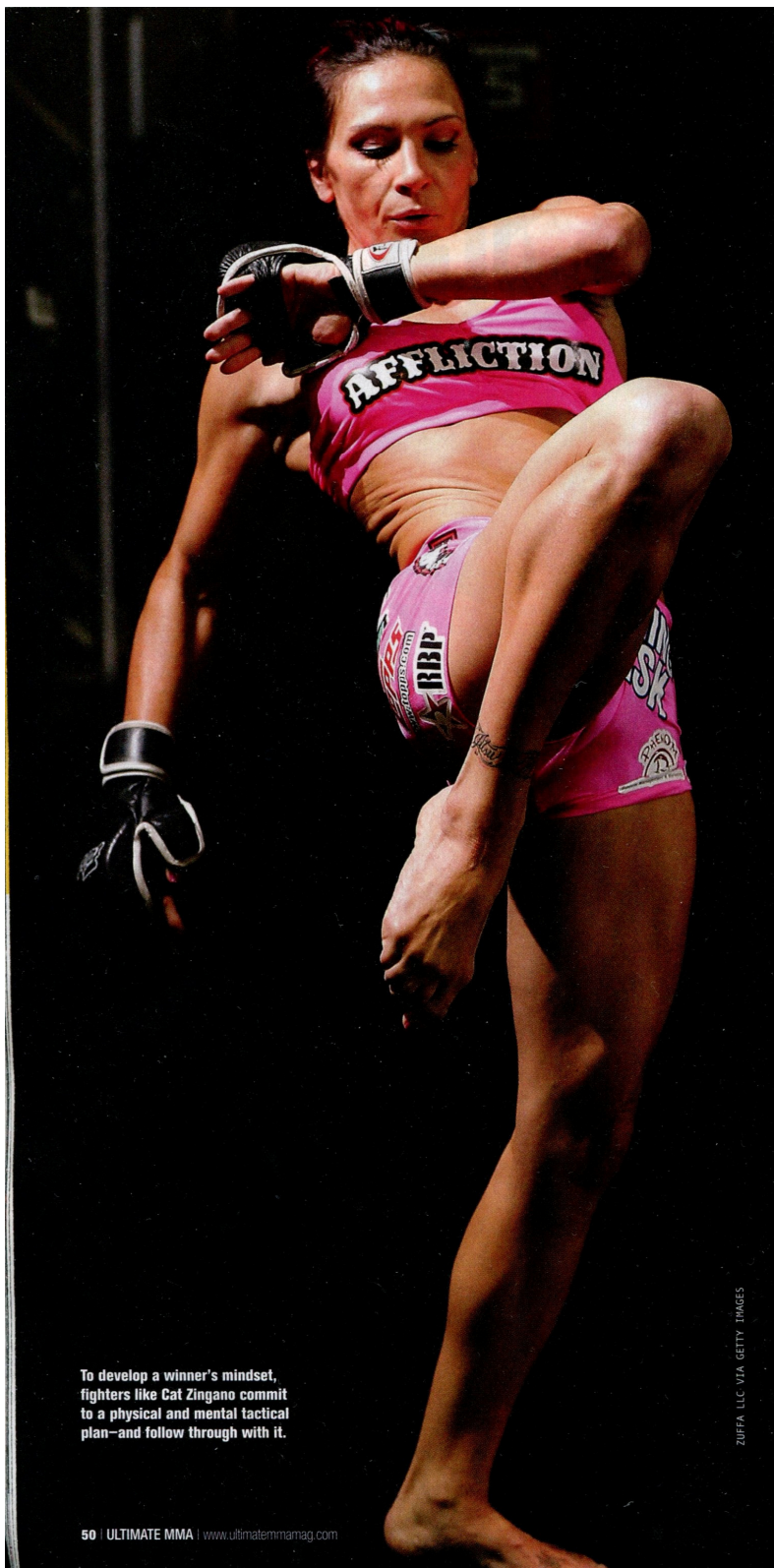
"Research shows that 11 hours of body relaxation combined with mental imagery and mindfulness showed positive changes in brain region (white matter) regulating emotions, thoughts and behavior," Silby says.

MINDSET

To Topple the
Reigning
Champ, a
Fighter Should
Practice These
10 Mental
Exercises

By Garrett Kim





To develop a winner's mindset, fighters like Cat Zingano commit to a physical and mental tactical plan—and follow through with it.

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4. Balance Your Energy Sometimes it's necessary to know when to get activated or fired-up and when to relax or calm down, Silby says, "because there are times in a fight when you have to know how to balance your energy."

5. Practice Imagery Use your senses to mentally experience the fight the way you want it to happen, or to navigate and respond to adversity, she suggests.

6. Concentrate The ability to focus on the most important information at the right time, every time, is essential. This includes responding to your technical knowledge and instinct for fighting as opposed to the "noise" surrounding the event, Silby says.

"Attention-control exercises can be implemented during training as well as simulations of the pressure situations, like fighting in the cage in which the event will occur," she says.

7. Develop Confidence Self-reflection writing can assist in this endeavor, as well as tracking accomplishments and actions you take to get those desired results, Silby says.

8. Speak Positively Talk positively to yourself to improve performance, to remind yourself of specific fight cues, and to describe rather than judge performance, she suggests.

9. Gauge Your Effort and Intensity Appropriately exert mental and physical energy intended for a specific purpose. Intensity can be charted and varied within practice simulations.

10. Commit to a Tactical Plan Define the fight plan both physically and mentally, Silby says. "Then, dedicate yourself to following through with your mental plans," she says. **MMA**

Fighters like Benson Henderson and Gilbert Melendez know the importance of mental preparation.

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AVOID THESE COMMON MISTAKES

"At the highest level of athletic competition, the differences between first and second place are usually fairly small," says Caroline Silby, Ph.D., a Washington, D.C.-based sports psychologist.

"The biggest mistake I see athletes make is disconnecting from the actions that got them to the top in the first place," she notes. "In an attempt to perform at their highest levels, athletes sometimes try so hard to be at their best that they end up disconnecting from the action of the fight. They are almost watching their bodies compete as opposed to being fully connected to what's happening on the mat and executing based upon technical knowledge, instinct and training."

This is why it very often takes a couple of attempts to defeat a reigning champion as the first one typically involves some level of disconnect between mind and body, she adds.

"Having a pre-determined mental game plan for the match that you commit to executing with 100 percent certainty and actually stating out-loud your intentions for the fight (i.e. actions you commit to taking in the fight as opposed to stating your prediction on outcome) are helpful strategies," Silby says.

Another common mistake is reacting to the wrong cues, she continues.

"The challenger might overly focus on the record and popularity of the champion or hype of the event as opposed to directing a 100 percent effort to executing positive steps to increase the likelihood of his own success," she says.

"I'm a big believer in 'go after it' and if it doesn't work, then you'll deal with it," Silby says. "But it's difficult to deal with a negative result that hasn't happened yet. All this does is make you miserable twice."

BENEFICIAL BUTTERFLIES

"Researchers have noted that more experienced and successful athletes believe that arousal and nervousness occur to help create a strong performance," says Caroline Silby, Ph.D., a Washington, D.C.-based sports psychologist

CAN CONFIDENCE KILL?

Many athletes, when asked whether they have the ability to defeat the reigning champion, will answer almost too confidently, announcing that they're going to "destroy" the champ or make him "cry like a baby."

These brash pronouncements can backfire, says Caroline Silby, Ph.D., a Washington, D.C.-based sports psychologist.

"If an athlete's competitiveness is tapped into by doing the unexpected, then this brash talk only serves to place expectations upon the athlete that he doesn't need," she says.

On the other hand, she adds, some athletes pronounce "destruction" as a way to verbally hold themselves accountable to a certain level of performance.

"Honestly, I don't know any athlete who steps into the ring without some doubt and uncertainty," she says.