

**PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS TRAINING FOR  
TAEKWON-DO COMPETITION**

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## INTRODUCTION

Picture this:

You are about to represent NZ at the ITF Taekwon-Do World Championships for the first time. There is a huge hall with 5 rings, banners and flags hanging down, hundreds of competitors and spectators, a deafening din, and your team is there cheering you on. The result of your bout will determine whether or not NZ will gain a medal. Hundreds of thoughts and emotions are racing through your head and you really feel the pressure to perform. You are full of self-doubts. In this situation you are expected to perform to the best of your ability – but can you really expect to...?

Some people may well be able to perform at a high standard in this situation despite the enormous pressure. Others may perform adequately but not to their full potential, and others may well crumble and perform poorly. What this shows is that people have in-built psychological skills training (PST) already, some more effective than others. PST involves training the mind, much as we train the body, to be able to perform optimally when we need it to. Hopefully, as you read through this paper you will notice how most of the principles of psychological training mirror those of physical training.

This thesis will cover in some depth the 3 primary methods of psychological skills training that I believe are most relevant to training for a Taekwon-Do competition. They are relaxation and centering, goal-setting, and imagery. Two other methods, self-talk and mental preparation, are mentioned briefly at the end.

So which of the methods are going to be most helpful for you? Well, continuing the comparison with physical training, if you find you lack strength and mass behind your techniques then most people would suggest you do some weight training. We can take the same approach to deciding which aspects of PST you may need to incorporate into your training program.

Problem: get too nervous before or during competition  
Most useful PST method: relaxation and centering

Problem: trouble maintaining high motivation levels  
Most useful PST method: goal-setting

Problem: need help with skill development  
Most useful PST method: imagery

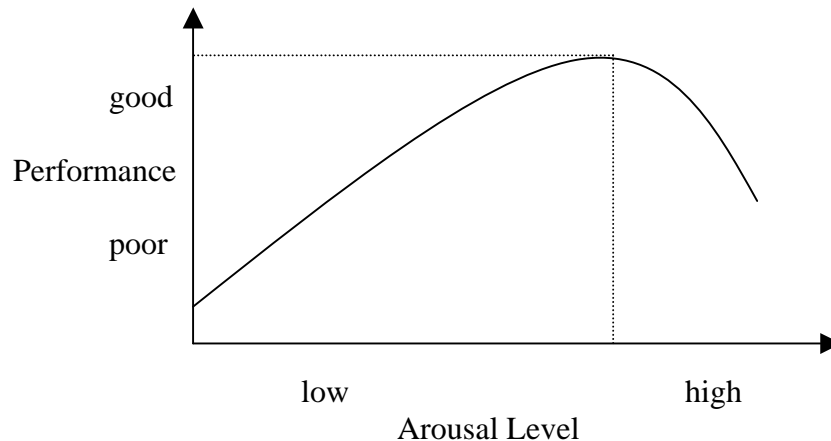
Problem: unable to maintain full concentration during task  
Most useful PST method: imagery and centering

Remember how I said earlier that a PST program has many similarities to a physical training program? Well, just like with training, you have to start your psychological training quite a long time before the competition if you want maximum benefit from it. I have seen some instances where athletes or coaches finally start to think about doing some PST a couple of weeks before an event. Imagine if you had left it until then to start your physical training – what hope would you really have...?

## RELAXATION AND CENTERING

### Background: Inverted-U Hypothesis

A reasonably simple theory of sports psychology is the so-called Inverted-U Hypothesis. This basically says that there is an optimal level of arousal for best performance, and if you are over or under-aroused then performance will suffer. This is demonstrated in the graph below (which kind of looks like an upside-down U):



This graph shows that at low levels of arousal (i.e. really relaxed) you are unlikely to perform very well because your body isn't physically prepared and you may well be thinking of things other than the competition. An example of this is the situation you might have seen where someone is sparring but they never quite seem to "get into it" and end up losing because they never "fired". As your arousal levels increase your performance should increase up to a point, known as your optimal arousal level (represented by the dotted line in the graph). Any further increases in arousal past the optimal arousal level will actually decrease your performance. The classic picture of the over-aroused sparring competitor is when they "lose it" and resort to trying to smash their opponent, ending up performing poorly.

So what is the optimal arousal level? On a scale of 1-10 is it 5, or maybe 8? Two main factors determine how aroused a competitor should be. First, the nature of the contest is important, and an example is the difference between patterns and sparring competition. For most people, they would be better off being more relaxed for patterns and more "psyched" for sparring. You will notice that I said "most" people, and this brings me to the second factor, namely individuality. A person's personality and style influences how aroused they should be. Some patterns competitors like to get worked up and give it heaps (e.g. Mr. Andrew Salton), and vice versa, some sparring competitors perform best when they seem relatively relaxed (e.g. Mr. Jake Goldsmith). The trick is to find out how psyched-up is best for you, and this can only be discovered through experience.

Having said that there is an ideal level of arousal for an individual in a certain competition, how can we control our arousal levels? Well, certain mind tools have been developed over many centuries, but only recently given technical names such as centering, the details of which are to be covered in the following section.

“...in that period of concentration before running in to kick – breathe in for one second, out for one, in for two, out for two, in for three, out for three. It has become part of the ritual”

Grant Fox (All Black goal kicker)

### The Centering Relaxation Technique

The good news is that you may well already know most of what there is to know about centering. Martial arts tend to put a focus on breathing and relaxation, and some instructors incorporate this into their classes. As I explained above, you want to be at the optimal level of arousal for yourself and the competition. Most people find that for a really big competition they are over-aroused and too tense. The purpose of centering is to reduce unwanted muscle tension and increase mental concentration. The trick for competitors is to become so good at this technique that it becomes useful at competition time.

Just like with a physical skill, you should start off by doing this in a non-stressful situation, such as before or after a club training or in your room at home for example.

Phase 1: practicing relaxation techniques in a relaxed situation

1. Get into a relaxed position either standing, lying or sitting.
2. Become aware of the area just below your belly button, the “centre” of your body.
3. Breathe slowly in through your nose and out through your mouth staying totally focused on this rhythm.
4. Every time you breathe out, repeat the word “one” (or something else you prefer) silently to yourself and feel your muscles (especially shoulders) relax.

Phase 2: using relaxation and centering during training

When you have done this a few times you can then move onto using centering in a more practical situation during training. For example, when you are called to perform a pattern, particularly one that you may be having some trouble with, go through a couple of cycles of breathing and concentration in the time between when the pattern is announced and when you have to start. The word you repeat to yourself should now be something relevant to the pattern (e.g. “freeze” if that is something you are working on). This is an example of self-talk which is covered briefly at the end of this thesis. You can do a similar thing before sparring or breaking if those are your areas of expertise. You should now be able to achieve a relaxed state where you are focused on what is important in just a few breaths because of the previous practice you have done in phase 1.

Phase 3: using relaxation and centering during competition

Hopefully you have the opportunity to enter into a few other competitions or even in the lead-up to the main competition. These might be Nationals, Regionals or even

simulated competitions against teammates during training. These situations provide the ideal chance to try out the centering technique to see what benefits it provides for you. If you find that you have trouble with centering immediately before a competitive situation, you have probably not spent enough time on phases 1 or 2, so hopefully there is still time to go back and remedy this. Remember, it is far better to discover your weaknesses before the main competition than during it!

## **GOAL-SETTING**

“There are three types of people in the world: those who make things happen; those who watch things happen; and those who ask ‘what the hell happened?’ Successful people, people who reach their goals, MAKE things happen.”

Anonymous

### Background: Performance vs. Outcome

If you are the second-best power breaker in NZ and you come up against Mr. Graham Patterson in a power breaking competition, you are going to lose. You may perform to the absolute best of your ability, yet still only come second. In a different competition, you may be up against competitors of less ability and experience than you. You may have an off day, missing a couple of breaks that you know you could normally do, and yet still win the competition. This hopefully illustrates the difference between performance and outcome; you may perform very well and lose, or perform poorly and win.

Now, if you think about which of those is under your control, it is obviously performance. It is next to impossible to control other people’s performance in a competition such as power breaking (without resorting to cheating). So it makes sense to focus your attention and efforts on the factor that you do have considerable control over. Many people get carried away with thinking about the possible outcome of such a competition (i.e. “am I going to win?”) at the expense of focusing on optimizing their own execution of skills.

“Success comes from doing your best, not necessarily being the best.”

Anonymous

### SMART goals

Training for a competition without goal-setting is like driving to an address for the first time without a map. The long-term goal is the destination, and the short-term goals are each of the streets you have to follow in order to get there. Finding the way correctly is much easier if you sit down with the map and plan the route before you leave.

Most people have a fair idea of the concept of goal-setting; New Year's resolutions you have made in the past are good examples. But how many of them actually worked as you intended? It is easy to say "I want to..." but it is not so easy following this through. I suggest that rather than just having goals, you have SMART goals.

A SMART goal is one that is:

**Specific:** rather than saying something broad such as "I want to improve my sparring" you need to identify what exactly it is about your sparring you want to improve (e.g. footwork, kicking speed, or dodging techniques?).

**Measurable:** if at all possible it is best to quantify goals with numbers so that you can accurately judge your success in achieving them. Specify the exact number (and type) of boards to be broken in power breaking, and likewise the exact height or length to be achieved in specialty technique. It is a little more difficult with sparring and patterns, however still possible with some inventiveness. For example, one measure of foot speed is the time it takes to perform 10 turning kicks on a pad at belt height. For patterns, you could measure the height that you can hold a side piercing kick at, or the amount of times out of ten you perform a satisfactory dodging reverse turning kick.

**Achievable:** as discussed in the background to this section, you are better off focusing on your performance, which is largely under your control, rather than outcome (i.e. winning), which largely is not. There is usually a lot of pressure from those around you to focus on the outcome ("bring us back a medal..!"), but such goals alone are likely to become a major source of pressure and stress rather than be helpful. With performance goals it is possible to lose and still be successful.

**Realistic:** this refers to setting goals that are out of your current reach but not out of sight. I know the saying "reach for the sky and you will touch the clouds", but setting impossible goals will mean you probably end up frustrated when you don't achieve them. The trick is to challenge yourself to achieve something that you know is possible, IF you put the work in.

**Time-based:** Finally, it is crucial that you set time limits on achieving each goal. This is the same as having a due date for a project, and keeps you to a schedule. Even if you do not make the target date, perhaps due to unforeseen events such as injury, you can still make adjustments and set a new date.

It is also important to have both long-term and short-term goals. The long-term goals are the dreams, the ultimate objective. The short-term goals allow the dream to be broken down into manageable steps. Often people set their long-term goals based around their weaker points to try and get them up to scratch. The whole point of goal-setting is to assist with motivation, and usually you need most help in working in your weaker areas (as on the whole, people love practicing things they are already good at).

So, once you have decided on your long-term goal(s) you need to decide how you are going to achieve this. You need to break down the long-term goal into the steps that are going to get you there. Finally, the strategies are the actual things you are going to have to do in order to reach each of your goals. Input from your coach at each stage is

likely to be very beneficial, so make use of their knowledge and experience. You MUST write down your goals, and a suggested example format is provided below.

Example: you have been assigned the overhead kick as your specialty technique break for the male team event. It is January and you can currently clear 2.5m but need to be able to clear 3m at the competition in July.

Long-term goal: clear 3m with overhead kick regularly by July.

In this case, the short-term goals are very straightforward – increasing the length you can jump by 10cm every month, and then maintaining consistency in the final month.

Short-term goals:	Target date
1. Clear 2.6m on 2 out of 4 attempts	1 Feb
2. Clear 2.7m “ “ “	1 March
3. Clear 2.8m “ “ “	1 April
4. Clear 2.9m “ “ “	1 May
5. Clear 3.0m “ “ “	1 June
6. Clear 3.0m on 4 out of 4 attempts	1 July

Coming up with the strategies require a fair degree of knowledge of training and exercise prescription – don’t be afraid to ask for advice if you are not sure.

Strategies:

1. practice jumping technique over obstacle after training twice a week
2. complete coach’s squat and lunge routines at gym twice a week, increasing weight by 10 kg each month
3. complete coach’s plyometric routines twice a week
4. spend a 10 minute session on imagery each week

It is also helpful to then create a simple spreadsheet to record progress:

	Wk 1	Wk 2	Wk 3	Wk 4	Short-term goal #1	Wk 5	etc...		
Jumping									
Weights									
Plyos									
Imagery									

Therefore, every week you can tick off each of the strategies and short-term goals when you have achieved them. While you may be thinking to yourself, “I don’t have time to do all this...” setting something like this up takes only a fraction of the time you will eventually spend on your physical training, so is actually an excellent investment.

I would suggest only having up to 3 long-term goals, each with their own set of short-term goals and strategies. Any more than this seems to make it difficult to give each goal its due attention.

Once you have done the easy part of deciding on your goals it is time to get down to the tough business of achieving them. It is crucial to write down your goals, and have an actual weekly checklist you can tick off. An example of a form you could use has been provided in the appendix. As you progress through your training program, regularly review your goal schedule. You may need to make alterations to target dates or even whole goals or strategies if you find they are not working for you or if circumstances change. Remember flexibility in your goal-setting is vital but should not be used as an excuse if you have been slack! If you have been training well, however, remember to periodically give yourself a reward.

“Being successful is a little like wrestling a gorilla. You don’t quit when you’re tired, you quit when the gorilla’s tired.”

Anonymous

## **IMAGERY**

### Background: motor programs

No, nothing about motocross or the Indy 500, sorry. Motor programs in sports science refer to the series of mental and physical processes that combine to create a movement. The movement that you can see is only the small final part of an extremely complex firing of neural circuits that have (hopefully) ensured that the movement is the correct one.

In very simplistic terms, the processes that contribute to a movement are

1. specific electrical impulses initiated in certain parts of the brain
2. some impulses travel to different parts of the brain causing more impulses
3. some impulses travel down spinal cord
4. impulses leave the spinal cord and travel along nerves to muscles
5. these muscles contract causing movement

What does this have to do with imagery for Taekwon-Do competition? Well, you can recreate many of the early stages of this process without moving a muscle, so to speak. Just by imagining a movement, you stimulate your brain and nerves into action, and obviously the more realistically you can imagine a situation, the more similar the neural response will be to real life. Some have even suggested that the brain cannot tell the difference between imagery and actual movement, but that is a little hard to believe. Nevertheless, imagery can be a powerful training tool when done properly.

There is a famous sports psychology study that looked at the effects of imagery on basketball free-throw shooting. They split a bunch of basketball players of a similar skill level into 3 groups:

1. Group 1 practiced 100 free-throws every day.
2. Group 2 practiced 50 free-throws and spent 10 mins on imagery of successfully doing free-throws every day.

3. Group 3 did no physical practice but spent 20 mins on imagery of successfully doing free-throws every day.

So, who do you think performed the best after a few weeks of doing this? I bet you think I am going to say Group 3, but it wasn't. It was actually Group 2, by quite a large margin. This makes the point that imagery is most useful when integrated in together with your physical training program.

Additional benefits of imagery, other than refining motor programs, are that it can help with anxiety control, self-confidence, and coping with unexpected events. Think how much less anxious you are likely to be at your tenth tournament compared to your first. Imagery, if performed well, means that you can have already competed at an event many times before you actually physically get there. As will be explained in the next section, you should mostly practice positive imagery where you are performing well. This helps to build confidence in yourself and your abilities.

OK, so hopefully I have convinced you that imagery can in fact be very helpful. So how do you go about doing it you ask? Read on...

“The difference between ordinary and extraordinary is that little bit ‘extra’.”

### Imagery scenarios

You first have to learn how to daydream, however, in this type of daydream you have complete control over what happens. Just like physical skills, with practice you gain more and more control over what happens. You start with imagery of everyday things that you know well, and then slowly progress to more difficult things, and finally you should have the skill to create Taekwon-Do competition scenarios. Imagery should be performed in a quiet setting free of distractions. You should try and stay relaxed but alert – imagery is different to meditation.

#### Phase 1

*Imagine your own bedroom. You are standing in one corner and looking around at all the furniture and objects around the room. Try to create and maintain a clear and vivid picture, and add in as many details as you can. See the colours and textures of the walls, floor and curtains.*

You should practice performing imagery on familiar things and situations until you feel that you can do this fairly easily and effectively. Imagery sessions should usually only take you between 5 and 10 mins, depending on the complexity.

#### Phase 2

*Now imagine yourself at a beach on a warm summer's day. See the yellow sand, blue water and sky, and white fluffy clouds. Feel the hot sand on the soles of your feet, and hear the waves breaking just off the shore and the calls of seagulls. Walk down to the*

*edge of the water, cup some in your hands and taste the salt water. Walk back to your spot on the beach, and imagine the feeling of relaxation and happiness.*

You may have noticed that the above passage started to involve more of the senses, rather than just what you can see. Also, the scenes now have you performing some sort of activity. You can make up many more similar scenarios.

### Phase 3

*Picture yourself standing in the ring at the competition venue. Imagine the other rings nearby and the spectator stands around the outside. Now put people in: maybe your opponent, your second or team members, officials, spectators. Now add in the noise of the crowd – really hear it. Feel the mat on the soles of your feet, and the sensation of the dobok and any equipment you are wearing. Taste the mouthguard if you are wearing one. See yourself preparing to start the competition, hear the sound of your own breathing and feel the sensation of anxiety.*

So this is just one example of a scenario, where you are about to start competing. There are endless situations during the course of a tournament that I am sure that you could think of. Remember to practice positive imagery, where you are performing well, as this will aid your self-confidence. It is also a good idea to occasionally imagine a negative situation, such as incurring an injury or finding yourself behind on points, and then figuring out how you would cope with that situation. Then, should something like that happen, you will be better prepared to deal with it.

It can be useful to record a few different such scenarios onto an audio tape or CD so you can replay it back regularly. Remember, when you record it, give ample pauses in between sentences to give yourself time to actually perform the imagery.

“Before I get in the ring, I’d have already won or lost it out on the road. The real part is won or lost far away from any witnesses – behind the lines, in the gym and out there on the road long before I dance under those lights.”

Muhammad Ali

### **SELF-TALK**

This method uses positive words and phrases that you can repeat to yourself at critical times of a competition. You may very well already do this, but if you can become aware of it and are therefore able to control it, you can use it your advantage. Self-talk is a very personal matter, so I cannot just tell you what words or phrases to use. However, there are some general principles that apply. You need to identify what self-talk you currently employ and whether these are constructive or unsupportive. Done well, self-talk can improve self-confidence and focusing attention on key areas.

Self-talk should always be positive rather than negative (you know the example of ‘don’t think of an orange’). So, if you have a problem with rushing patterns during competitions, rather than saying to yourself “don’t rush” while performing, something

like “relax and slow” would usually be better. Similarly, replace “don’t stuff up” with “I can do this”.

## **MENTAL PREPARATION**

This involves establishing a set routine for the time leading up to competition that gets you in the optimal mental state to perform. Like self-talk, what is best really depends on the individual athlete and the type of competition. Related to the section on relaxation and centering, some athletes like to be more or less psyched-up than others. Whatever suits you, it is helpful to recognize the type of build-up that is associated with your top performances and make this a routine before all competitions.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this thesis I have attempted to provide information and practical guidelines on some of the key areas of sport psychology training, with a specific focus on Taekwon-Do. Sports psychology does not have to be done perfectly in order to be effective, so don’t be put off giving it a go even if you don’t feel as if you are an expert. I challenge you to attempt to utilize one or more of the above methods in your Taekwon-Do training.

It doesn’t just have to be for a Taekwon-Do competition either. Pretty much all of the above principles would also apply to a grading for example. Many of the skills also have application to other life situations, such as preparing for exams or similar stressful events.

I hope this thesis has been interesting to read and will be useful to you in some way.

“Be willing to go where the going may be tough and do the things that are worth doing even though they are difficult.”

From ‘The Philosophy of Taekwon-Do’ by Gen. Choi Hong Hi

For further expansion on any of the topics in this thesis I recommend a book that I consulted while writing this thesis called ‘Sport Motivation: training your mind for peak performance’ by Ken Hodge.

Appendix: Goal-setting schedule

Name:

Date:

Long-term goal #1:

Short-term goals:

Target date

1.

2.

3.

4.

Strategies:

1.

2.

3.

4.

Long-term goal #2:

Short-term goals:

Target date

1.

2.

3.

4.

Strategies:

1.

2.

3.

4.