

## **MENTAL PREPARATION: IT'S NOT JUST IN YOUR HEAD**

No one area of preparation for play is receiving as much attention as **mental preparation**. In monitoring the play of elite teams one thing is blatantly evident. Technical skills alone do not account for the continued success of the vast majority of teams.

Top coaches and their players understand that ignorance of mental preparation skills, deals a losing hand to that team. In today's competitive environment, teams hoping to win on sheer technique and practice alone are fooling themselves big time!

Much has been written and field tested in the area of stress management. Not, only in sports but in life in general. There is a "cornucopia" of activities available for you to try. At your local audio shop, you will find commercially produced stress management audio and video tapes. Most use music to some degree. Music is being used more and more by athletes to place them selves into what author James Loehr calls the **ideal performance state** (I.P.S.). The type of music makes a big difference. The athlete that needs pumping up might listen to very upbeat, "heavy metal" music while the athlete that is already "on edge" might be better served with music that is more soothing.

As athletes, we all have experienced the times when we were "in the zone". Although descriptions of "the zone" will vary, often it is described as a time in which total focus was achieved. All possible distractions were ignored without consciously doing so. Needless to say, we performed. We did the things we knew we could do when we needed to do them.

Author James Loehr in his book, "Mental Toughness Training for Sport" coined the phrase used earlier in this article. He calls the zone, the **ideal performance state** (IPS). It is his contention that the IPS is a combina-

tion of two factors, energy (which can be either high or low) and the degree to which that energy level is either pleasant or unpleasant. The combination of these two factors is illustrated in fig. 1 below.

Quadrant A of the diagram is the area of **HIGH POSITIVE ENERGY**.

The feeling here is one of relaxation, a calm mental state, and focus.

Quadrant B is the area of **HIGH NEGATIVE ENERGY** and the athlete has tight muscles and his/her mental state is accelerated with tunnel vision.

Quadrant C is the area of **LOW POSITIVE ENERGY** and is characterized by relaxed muscle tension, a calm mental state but the athlete is unfocused.

Lastly, quadrant D is the area of **LOW NEGATIVE ENERGY**. The athlete will notice a low to moderate muscle tension, variable mental state and clearly the athlete is unfocussed

In terms of the likelihood for success, clearly A is the IPS and will offer the greatest opportunity for success followed by B and C. In D, the athlete will almost always perform poorly. The athlete will experience different feelings in each of the four mental states as well.

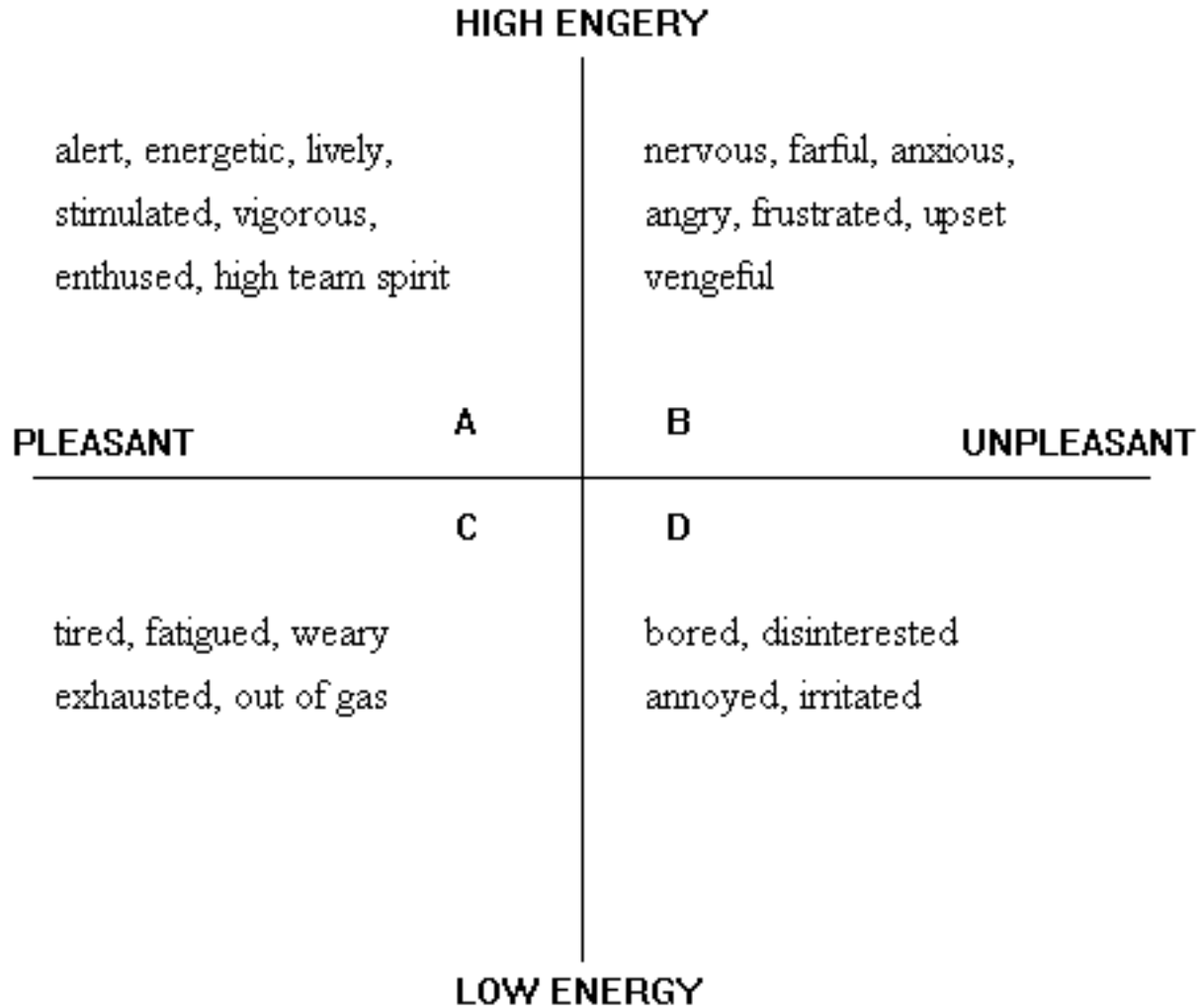


fig. 2

"As indicated in fig. 2, the high positive energy cell "A" is directly related to relaxed muscles, a calm mental state and the ability to maintain an appropriate focus. The data collected indicates that some states of high energy do not lead to overarousal. The exaggerated fight or flight alarm reaction was not triggered in spite of the presence of the high-intensity energy state. The high negative energy cell "B" revealed an entirely different picture. Here high levels of negative energy were associated with tight muscles, a fast, accelerated mental state, and tunnel vision - a very rigid, inflexible, and generally inappropriate kind of mental focus. The low positive energy cell "C" (low energy but still pleasant) was consistently paired with relaxed muscles, a clam mental state, but

poor concentration and focus. Here the problem was not tunnel vision, however, but rather one of being easily distracted. Athletes found their attention constantly wandering off to irrelevant things during play. They could be distracted by almost anything. Only with great effort could they keep themselves mentally on target. The low negative energy cell "D" (low energy that is unpleasant) provided the most inconsistency and unpredictability. Muscle tension varied from low to moderate, and mental calmness was highly variable. Considerable inconsistency was also reported in reference to concentration. Both tunnel vision problems and distractibility problems were reported."

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