

ELITE COACHING & PERFORMANCE

BEST DAY THINKING

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FOR YOUR BEST PERFORMANCE, WHEN YOU WANT IT

Every skill has a feeling which matches it. When you experience that exact feeling, the skill becomes a natural expression, needing little or no deliberate thought. Just like when you laugh, a feeling naturally creates movement in your body.

Depending on your world view, feelings can be caused by different factors. I lean toward the model which suggests feelings come from three ingredients – what you do with your body, what you do with your words and what you focus on (what you do with your mind).

You don't see miserable people skipping down the street, because the body movement doesn't match the feeling. However, if you are feeling miserable, try skipping for a few minutes and notice how it changes you.

Likewise, you don't see people in love whispering about their feelings, instead you see them happily telling the world like Tom Cruise on Oprah's couch shouting love to everyone.

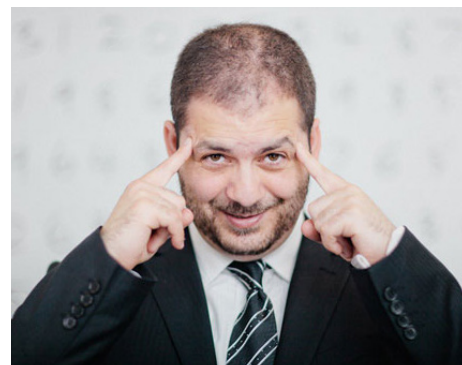
Furthermore, if I wanted you to become angry, just telling you to get angry would not work. Changing your focus would. If I told you your child's teacher hit or ridiculed them in front of the class on a daily basis, that change of focus is enough to get you angry.

Of these ingredients – body, words and focus – I have found 'focus' to be the one most needing to be addressed by athletes. I have also found that when you get the focus right, it has amazing power with very little effort.

To design the focus and thinking required for each athlete to perform at their best, I use a model I call 'Best Day Thinking'. Essentially it is about working out what an athlete focuses on when they have their BEST performance, then being so clear on it



Pictured: Winter X Games Medal won by American Freestyle Skier Colby James West (left) and Australian Memory Champion Tansel Ali (right) who memorised the Yellow Pages. The result of Best Day Thinking.



they can duplicate that thinking on days when they need their best performance. It works on the premise that on the best day you have a mental recipe you apply, while on your 'off' days you use a different recipe.

For example, there will be things which cause you to laugh spontaneously when you think about them. You just can't help it. Maybe it's a time when a family member walked into a glass door they thought was open, or a funny dinner party when your favourite uncle was laughing so hard he launched his dentures onto the table.

Now if we want you to go into a social environment and to light up the room when you walk in, we simply need to have you talk and focus on those funny occasions for the short time before you enter. You then can't help but have the feeling required to bring out your best social self. You instinctively walk in with a legitimate smile on your face. Compare that to times when you don't want to go to a function and, on the way, you have been talking about all the people you hope you don't get stuck talking to. You then walk in with a very contrived smile which people know is not real and you easily get tired from faking it. Your focus has had you under perform and use more energy.

Similarly, when an athlete is at their best, they have things they focus on which bring out the best of their ability and more. Just like a funny thought will move their body involuntarily, athletes have thoughts which help them excel involuntarily.

To find these, I simply ask the athlete to talk me through their favourite performance, or their imagined favourite performance if they haven't yet had one. I get them to walk me through their day and explain what their attitudes about everything are. Typically you will find their routine is much the same as other days, but their attitude and approach are different.

On a bad day, during their warm up for the event, they might be focusing on how sore they are, while on their best day they feel just as sore but they know they are just warming up.

On a bad day they might focus on how good all the other competitors look, while on their best day they laugh with their friends and don't even notice the other competitors.

It's pretty simple stuff, but it is crucial awareness and sensitivity are given to these thoughts because they are a recipe. If you change one ingredient in the recipe, you get a different result. For instance, what happens if your athlete turns up to an event and they are laughing and chatting with friends? This may be their 'Best Day Thinking,' which will bring out the best of their ability, but maybe you don't feel they are focused enough, so you call them over and have them look at all their competitors to think through a strategy. Logically it sounds like a good idea, but on their best day they may not do that and you have just dissolved their killer instinct by asking them to do it your way.

Some people will want to watch their competitors, and some will want to get fired up. Everyone is different, but if you want to bring out the best ability in someone you need to find out what their 'Best Day Thinking' is and allow it.

This is where 'positive thinking' lacks some impact because positive thinking is often only present on a bad day. The athlete says their legs feel heavy and we might say, "You'll be right, give them a shake. You can do it. You'll be fine when you get out there." This all sounds good, but to measure the effectiveness you need to compare it to how they handle the same feelings of heavy legs on their 'best day.' If you have discussed this with them prior and you know their 'best day thoughts,' then you can remind them that, on their best day, they respond by saying, "They'll be alright five minutes into the race." This is a more powerful approach as it is a re-creation of their best performance recipe.

If you do try to have a conversation with your athlete about their best day thinking, you will often find they answer with, "But when I am playing really well, I am not thinking about anything!" That is true. Often when we are at our best we are in a state of instinct, fully immersed in the task at hand. So ask them what their thinking is leading up to the competition. "When you are heading to the game and you know you are going to nail it that day, what are you most excited about? What are you looking forward to?" or "On your

best day, when you feel tired but you still know you are going to have a great day, what is your attitude to your fatigue?" By asking questions like this you reveal where their focus is on their best days.

As a coach, when I know this pattern, I never make them do it like clockwork. When they are actually in the zone it is raw instinct, there is nothing contrived about their thought process at all. This means 'best day thoughts' are actually the thoughts just before they enter the zone, not while they are in it. So when coaching at training or in competition I just let the athlete enjoy their sport. It's only when I see them focusing on the wrong thing or getting distracted from their best recipe that I refocus them on their 'Best Day Thinking' which allows the zone to happen. Most of the time they don't even know I have done it. We just have a chat and they don't know why, but they feel better.

There are times when an athlete gets so lost they cannot get out of their negativity or 'Worst Day' recipe. I try to catch them early before they go too far down the path of a negative mindset and thus can't come back, but this is not always possible. If the athlete gets very negative 'Best Day Thinking' won't work until you first break their negative mood. To do this you need to take them off guard. For example, challenge them to a farting contest – loudest fart wins. Pour your drink over your head. Lay down in the street. Do anything to create an emotion in them

which is different to their negative one. Once they pop out of the negative mood, remind them of a 'Best Day' thought.

This Best Day Thinking tool can refocus an athlete if they have become too mechanical and lost their killer instinct. It can also set them up to be in their zone for competition. Most of all, just by letting an athlete know they can have a different mental focus in competition and in practice will help them reconnect to their innate instinct.



Pictured: Australian Olympic swimmer Matt Targett (top) and American freestyle skier and Winter X Games Medallist Colby James West (bottom). Two of the talented individuals Mark coached using his Best Day Thinking model.

SAMPLE OF HOW SOMEONE'S BEST DAY THINKING MIGHT LOOK WHEN WORKSHOPPED:

WORST DAY THINKING	INEFFECTIVE PEP TALK	BEST DAY THINKING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Says: "I feel crap today." • Says: "It just doesn't feel right." • Focuses on: "I just don't have any energy." • Focuses on: "Their team is just so big." • Focuses on: "The coach helps so and so way more than they help me." • Says: "I might just see if coach will let me sit out for a bit." • Focuses on: My equipment is crap. • Focuses on: "I just can't" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coach: "You'll be right. Shake it out." • Athlete: "I'll be right, I'll just try to finish." • Athlete: "I can do this. I trained well. Just got to do it." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Says: "I am going to smash it today!" • Focus: Imagines what they will do once out on the field. • Focus: Laughs with friends about the opponent's mistakes last time. • Focus: Looks for a flow in their style. • Say: Just wants to get out there. • Focus: Get the ball!

BEST DAY THINKING WORKSHEET

Workshop your Best Day Thinking. Choose an aspect of your life where you would like to be at your best and answer the below with that situation in mind.

WORST DAY THINKING	INEFFECTIVE PEP TALK	BEST DAY THINKING
On your worst day, what are you most focused on or aware of during each part of the day or event?	What things do you do or say to pep yourself up, but turn out to be only present on a bad day and are thus ineffective?	On your best day, what are you most focused on or aware of during each part of the day or event?