

# Mental Warm-Up: How to Build Confidence Before a Game

How athletes prepare for competition can go a long way in determining their success. Whereas the physical aspect of preparation is rarely overlooked, athletes often skip their mental preparation. Positive thoughts can build an athlete's confidence in his or her ability to execute.

Physical dynamic warm-ups have long played an important role in pre-game routines, because they improve body function and help prevent injury. Wouldn't it be great if there were a *mental* warm-up to help an athlete build confidence before the game?

At the youth level, the physical [dynamic warm-up](#) is usually led by the head coach, and at the collegiate and professional levels by a strength and conditioning coach. Regardless of who leads the warm-up, the fact that a coach schedules time for the activity, explains its purpose and closely watches over it sends a message to the athletes that it is important to follow the routine to maximize their performance.

An analogous mental warm-up rarely exists for athletes. I often work with athletes to create and implement a pre-performance mindset that allows them to eliminate negative self-talk, build confidence and specifically create a "best-self" mindset for competing. Most of these athletes never thought about how to get into an effective mindset pre-performance. Before they learned these techniques, many of them had detrimental thoughts before competition.

I equate the need for a pre-performance mindset routine to the pre-shot routine basketball players go through before taking a foul shot. Both routines help athletes get into a calm, confident, comfortable position from which they can execute their specific fundamentals.

**RELATED:** [Boost Self-Confidence With 5 Sports Psychology Tips](#)

## Creating a Mental Pre-Performance Routine

Creating a mental pre-performance routine helps an athlete get into a mindset that allows him or her to perform their best, and prevents them from getting in their own way. I call this the "best-self" mindset. It includes three to five keywords or short phrases that cue the athlete into a specific vision of the "process behaviors" he or she performs, feels, experiences and exhibits when they're playing their best. The keywords and phrases guide them through every performance, even (or maybe especially) when things are not going well for them or their team.

"Process behaviors" represent the habits and characteristics an athlete has control over and can perform regardless of how the competition is going. Words and phrases like *aggressive*, *attack*, *head held high*, *focus on the field*, *having fun*, *communicating*, *being positive with my teammates* are examples of "process behaviors." The athlete can stay committed to these habits and attitudes at all times during a competition, regardless of whether the game is going well.

If you want to get into the right mindset, it's simply not enough to put on headphones and listen to your favorite pump-up music. Before practice or a game, athletes often feel too rushed to practice a true mental warm-up, since coaches don't actively set aside time for it to happen.

I recommend this process as a coach-led pre-game routine. Coaches should use the expertise of a sports psychologist to help their players create their specific individualized "best-self" mindsets—because every athlete is unique, and each ideal pre-game mindset will be different. The next step is to designate a few minutes specifically to allow the athletes to get into their pre-performance mindsets.

Just as the physical dynamic warm-up is scheduled and presided over, so too should the mental warm-up. It sets up an expectation that the athletes need to get their minds prepared as well as their bodies. The more times an athlete completes this process, the more easily and effectively he or she will be able to profitably use their positive pre-performance mindset.

***RELATED:*** [5 Pillars of Mental Toughness](#)