



Winning the Athletic Mental Game Book Excerpt 1

From Chapter 3: J Robinson: Creating an Unshakeable Belief System

You like to use motivational sayings. Is that a big part of your coaching? Does that help you maintain the competitive edge at your level?

Bear Bryant once said, "I'm not the smartest guy around. But I can take what other people do and make it work for me." I relate to that. There is a lot great wisdom out there. As coaches, we try to sum up principles in short sayings that can be remembered.

We're living in an information age where people have so much thrown at them. The key is finding something to stick. I like quotes because they allow me to narrow down a concept, which helps athletes focus on something concrete.

Motivational quotes are part of building that belief system with your athletes the entire time they are in your program. Motivation is a learned skill. If they don't learn how to motivate themselves, you can't get them to do what you want.

Sometimes, as coaches, we develop unrealistic expectations. You can't ask a kid to run before they can walk. Fundamental principles don't change. For example, the same way the Egyptians built the pyramids is the same way you would build them today.

But athletes need the basics in place to succeed later. Those would be **dedication, discipline, sacrifice, and most important - a solid work ethic.**

Let's say you have a kid come into your program who has dominated in high school, but now they are facing much tougher competition. How do you instill mental toughness in that athlete, especially after defeats or setbacks early on?

First, we have to be realistic with them. They may have never lost in high school, then they get here and get beat up pretty bad. We try to talk with them a lot, especially the freshman. Everyone wants to know that they are like others who have been through similar experiences. So what we do is share a lot of examples of other top guys who have come in and suffered during that initial adjustment period. We tell them you must go through this to get ready for the next level.

We'll tell them, "Hey, the same thing happening to you is what happened to our 4 time All Americans. They had similar experiences when they were here. They couldn't get any takedowns. They didn't think they were that good anymore."

When you make those comparisons to those great athletes who they may look to as role models, then that athlete will believe that they are just like everyone else and keep pushing forward.

You have to monitor where they are mentally. We do some things differently then other teams. For example, we dress in the locker room with the kids. We put our coaches lockers next to the freshman lockers. You can see when a kid is up or down or if he is having a hard time adjusting. After a tough practice where he may have been roughed up pretty good you can tell him, "hey, don't worry about it. The same thing happened to (names several former All-Americans). It helps you monitor them more closely as opposed to being on the practice field with them and that's it.

There is an intimacy in wrestling that is different than other sports. We train in the trenches with the guys. I wrestled everyday until I was almost 40, then I couldn't anymore after several knee operations.

The bottom line is that we go into their world instead us trying to bring them into our world. Also, if you have closer contact, especially with the younger guys, you can joke around with them and break down barriers. We have friendly banter with the guys.

We like to keep in close contact with them because they get beat up pretty bad and they get down on themselves. But if you can catch them right away and talk to them about the big picture, you can give them a time period of how long they have to go through this (rough period), which is important. For example we might say, 'after three or four months, you will see light at the end of the tunnel.'

Now if you don't say anything to them, they will think that this (rough period) is something that will go on forever. We tell them better times are ahead and why it will be better in three or four months.

We'll say, "Hey, you are lifting four times a week and increasing your endurance with running. Give them rational reasons they can relate to. The reason you are here is that your body isn't a machine yet. We are building your endurance. That takes 3 to 4 months to build up. Around January, you will be holding your own." This gives them something to hold on to. One of the most important things in life is hope. It's critical for them to understand that. This helps keep their belief system going. You have to be able to believe in the face of adversity.

One of the biggest challenges...

(Note: You just read one-fourth of the full interview found in Winning the Athletic Mental Game.)