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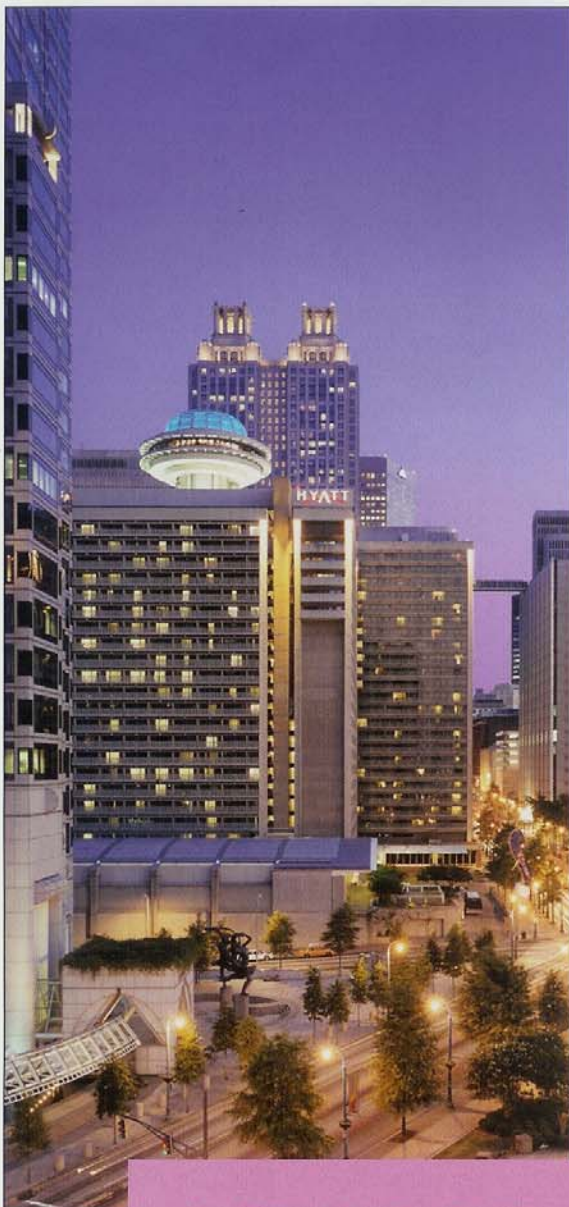
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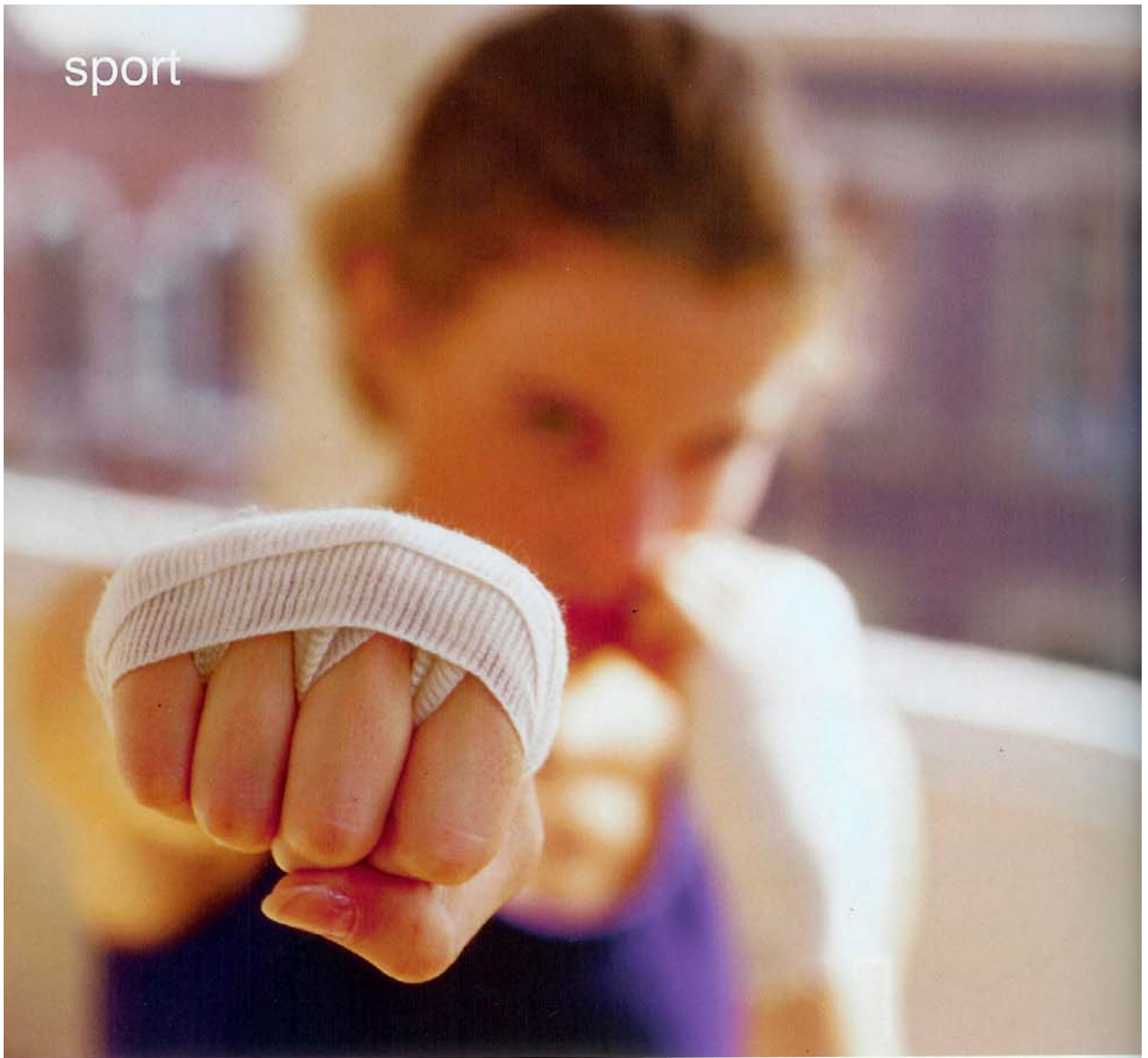


Celebrity photographer **John Russo**'s work has been featured in *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim*, to name a few. This month, Russo captures Nicolette Sheridan for our cover and feature story. Russo has shot the famous faces of Kevin Costner, Josh Hartnett, Kevin Bacon, Sylvester Stallone, Paris Hilton and many more. He teaches a course in celebrity photography at the Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, Calif. He currently lives in Beverly Hills, Calif., though he grew up in New Jersey. For more on Russo and his work, view johnrussophoto.com.

Ron Jones is a licensed corporate wellcoach, American College of Sports Medicine health and fitness instructor, and USA Cycling coach based in Atlanta. As an athlete, Jones is a two-time Race Across America cycling champion and two-time Biathlon All-American. This month, Jones tells us how mental training can be the key to athletic success. For more information on mental skills training and Jones, go to ronjones.org.



sport



make over your mind

The key to athletic success? Being mentally tough.

Why do Olympic skiers do the bob-and-weave shuffle with their eyes closed right before racing? Why can a team lose a championship if it “chokes?” Why is the field of mental-skills training one of the fastest-growing in athletics? The answers to these questions lie in the mind. There are five primary mental-training skills used by world-class athletes: regulating arousal, relaxation, goal setting, mental imagery and keeping attention focused. Outlined below is a how-to for mastering each skill and, ultimately, mastering your mind.

1. AROUSAL: GET PUMPED

Get fired up. Jump up and down. Listen to your favorite music. Maybe even have someone get in your face and yell at you. Do whatever you need to do to get pumped up. How amped do you need to be to accomplish your athletic goals? It depends upon your sport. If you're a Georgia Bulldog linebacker, you'll need higher arousal levels (more mental pump) than a PGA golfer. The perfect level of mental pump blends optimal arousal with optimal relaxation—it's a yin-yang relationship.

**“If you’ve ever been in the zone,
I don’t need to tell you how great it is.”**

Too much pump equals disaster if you lose control. What is an example of too much arousal? If you’re playing tennis and miss a shot, which causes you to lose your temper and further hamper your performance, it means you’re too pumped up. On the other hand, if you’re not pumped up enough, you might be daydreaming when the tennis ball whizzes by. When you have the perfect mix of arousal to relaxation, it’s easier to flow and find the sweet spot, otherwise known as “the zone.” If you’ve ever been in the zone, I don’t need to tell you how great it is. Being in the zone means you make everything look easy—and the mental effort it takes to get there is well worth it.

2. RELAXATION: CHILL OUT

This point is related to the first. After you’ve reached the zone, it’s easy to get full of yourself and overly aggressive, which will take you right back out of the zone. Knowing how to relax is helpful for calming down mentally when you are too pumped up or over-aroused. The idea with relaxation is that you can de-pump dangerously high arousal levels and come back into the zone where everything goes just right. Something as simple as taking three deep breaths can relax you back toward the zone. As you focus on breathing instead of excessive aggression, you release that excess pump that is threatening to blow it for you.

3. GOAL SETTING: GET OUT THE MAP

In life, and especially in athletics, plans are fundamental to success. Sports goals are plans or road maps for your athletic journey. There are two basic types of sports goals: process goals and outcome goals. Process goals focus on improving basic skills like form, technique and strategy, all of which lead to better performance. With process goals, skill development is emphasized over winning. The second goal type, outcome goals, focuses on the end results of athletic endeavors—namely, whether you win or lose. Amateur athletes often place a higher premium on outcome goals than process goals. However, most elite athletes learn to prioritize the “little” goals of improving skills. They understand that prioritizing outcome goals can be hazardous, because it’s easy to forget the skills that make winning possible. Doing each skill well (focusing on process goals) will result in the best performance, which then produces your best outcome.

4. MENTAL IMAGERY: BE THE TIGER

Using mental imagery involves more than just visualizing images; it also requires using your other senses to “feel” what it’s like to succeed. Use your sense of sight, smell, hearing, touch and even taste to mentally prepare yourself to compete. Olympic skiers bobbing and weaving back and forth with their eyes closed are using imagery to “feel” their race before they ever leave the chute. They understand that when their minds are prepared to excel, their bodies usually will follow suit. Mental imagery helps with the other four mental skills, too. For example, you can use mental imagery to get pumped up if you imagine yourself as a tiger. On the other hand, if you’re too pumped up, use imagery to feel yourself as a cat taking a summer nap in a tranquil nature scene.

5. ATTENTION: HIT YOUR MENTAL BULL’S-EYE

How do you hit your athletic target? Focus on things that improve your performance and block out everything else. A great way to practice this is with a partner. While you perform a skill like making a basket, sinking a putt or serving a tennis ball, have your partner introduce simple distractions by waving his or her arms or talking loudly. If you can filter out those distractions and stay focused on performing the skill well, have your partner increase the distraction level to yelling or tossing an object in front of you right before you attempt your task. Being able to focus attention in athletics is the most important mental skill. It allows you to hit your mental bull’s-eye without being distracted.

While mental-skills training has its limitations and can’t replace physical training or fix pre-existing psychological disorders of a clinical nature, it can indeed improve athletic performance and help mitigate the stresses associated with competition. Mental-skills training works for athletes young and old, elite and recreational, and even can be applied to non-sport competitive settings such as business deals. —BY RON JONES