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A conversation with Jennifer L. Etnier

Author of *Bring Your "A" Game: A Young Athlete's Guide to Mental Toughness*

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Q: What inspired you to write *Bring Your "A" Game: A Young Athlete's Guide to Mental Toughness*?

A: The simple answer is "because of the obvious need." It only takes a few minutes of observing a youth sporting event to see that many young athletes are in serious need of mental toughness training. Anyone watching these events will see athletes dropping their heads after a mistake, losing their temper after a decision by an official, making errors on easy scoring opportunities, and berating their teammates.

Additionally, many coaches have told me that they wished they'd had access to sport psychology when they were younger. They've also expressed that they wished there were sport psychology materials targeted towards young athletes and available for their teams. For these reasons, I thought a book designed to make mental toughness training skills available to young athletes would be a huge help to them as they worked to achieve their potential in sport.

Q: Who will benefit from reading this book? Is it geared towards specific sports?

A: The skills that are described in this book were developed in the field of sport psychology, and the book was written specifically for young athletes. However, the book is not geared towards any specific sport. Instead, the book was intentionally written to include examples from a variety of sports, and the skills that are introduced are equally applicable to team sports and to individual sports. Despite the focus on sport, the mental toughness skills that are described in the book can be of benefit to any person who has performance-related goals. In addition to athletes, this book can benefit a variety of people, including entrepreneurs, performing artists, gamers, and students. Simply put—anyone who has aspirations of achieving success could benefit from the development of mental toughness.

Q: What are your own experiences with competitive sports? Have you used these techniques yourself?

A: My parents are phenomenal athletes, and I grew up learning to play a wide variety of sports
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and learning to love them all! I was the only girl playing on an all-boys soccer team in high school, and I was a regular starter during my junior and senior years. I lettered in three sports in high school—softball, soccer, and basketball—and wish I could have played more sports. I played soccer at the University of Tennessee and was the sweeper and team captain. I then played soccer semi-professionally for one season and had the opportunity to play for my state team at regional competitions on two occasions. I coached youth soccer teams for a number of years and was a volunteer assistant coach at Wake Forest University for three years. I continue to play soccer and look forward to getting back into coaching when my children are old enough to participate in sport.

As a young athlete, I was not formally aware of the field of sport psychology or of the mental skills that are so important to the development of mental toughness. I believe that many of these skills were instilled in me by my parents (positive self-talk, maintaining focus, confidence, commitment, and work ethic), but I certainly think that I might have had greater success in sport had I been aware of other beneficial techniques such as goal setting, mental imagery, and energy management. As an adult, I use these techniques in sport and in reaching my professional aspirations, and I find that they give me an edge that allows me to perform well in a variety of situations.

Q: How important do you think sports psychology and mental toughness are for successful performance?

A: Mental toughness is a critical factor from the time a young person begins to learn a new sport to the time when an elite athlete is competing for a valued prize. Mental toughness helps an athlete to commit to the hours of training necessary for success while maintaining the balance necessary to persevere, makes it possible for an athlete to maintain confidence and focus in challenging situations, and helps an athlete come to every competition ready to perform at a high level and to battle through the periods of adversity and disappointment that they may face. For the young athlete, mental toughness is key to realizing his or her full potential. At the highest level of play, mental toughness is often the deciding factor in important competitions.

Q: Are there any characteristics beyond mental toughness that are essential for success in sports?

A: A host of physical attributes can contribute to your ability to be successful in sport. In this book, I talk about the importance of recognizing which of these physical attributes are solely determined by your genetic make-up and which can be modified through training. The key is to be able to make the most of the physical attributes that you have, to maximally improve the physical attributes that can be changed, and to develop other game-related skills to ensure that you are the best player you can be. And the key to doing these three things is mental toughness. Thus, although physical characteristics can certainly help you to achieve success, it is my belief

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that athletes who do not have mental toughness will not reach their potential regardless of their physical attributes.

Q: How important are coaches and teammates in achieving success?

A: Before I answer this question, I should point out that I define success as performing at your best regardless of the outcome of the event. When success is defined this way, the bulk of the responsibility falls upon the individual athlete. The athlete must have the psychological skills and the mental toughness to bring his or her "A" game to every competition. That being said, coaches and teammates can certainly help you to reach this goal. Supportive and challenging teammates, knowledgeable and skillful coaches who understand sport psychology, and a positive and competitive training environment can contribute to your ability to develop every day. In my book, I address the importance of selecting a coach and team that will help you to develop into the best athlete you can be.

Q: Is there any single mental skill that you view as being more important than the others?

A: Although all of the mental skills that I describe are important for the development of mental toughness, there is one mental skill that is commonly used by all elite athletes. Mental imagery is the process of imagining yourself performing some particular action. It is a technique that can be extremely helpful for mental toughness because it can be used in a number of different ways and in conjunction with other mental skills. For example, you can use mental imagery to visualize past accomplishments to maintain (or regain) confidence. You can use it to help manage your energy levels as part of your pre-performance routine or to help you relax the night before an important competition. You can use it to rehearse performance skills so that they can be performed well in the face of adversity or to practice them when you are fatigued or injured and unable to perform physically. Thus, mental imagery is a skill that greatly facilitates the development of mental toughness in ways that will be realized in competition.

Q: How did you come up with these techniques? How do you know they are effective?

A: I can't take credit for coming up with the sport psychology skills per se as these are techniques that are a part of the sport psychology literature. However, I have recognized that these skills have not been made available to young athletes. For this reason, I have written this book specifically for this age group and have provided descriptions of the techniques, examples, worksheets, and anecdotes designed to translate these skills to the language of young athletes.

With respect to knowing that these skills are effective, that evidence comes from several sources. Many of these skills were initially identified by simply asking elite athletes what types of psychological skills they used to perform at the highest level. Since their initial identification, however, most of these techniques have been tested scientifically to establish their effectiveness in sport situations. Although future research will undoubtedly teach us more about the specifics

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of utilizing these techniques, the evidence clearly suggests that mastery of these skills is advisable for those interested in performing at their best on a consistent basis.

Q: You include exercises and worksheets at the end of each chapter. How should these be used?

A: My hope is that readers will use these exercises in conjunction with their reading of the relevant material. However, many of these worksheets will also need to be revisited over time so that the mental skills can evolve with the development of the athlete. For example, the goal setting worksheet is designed to identify short- and long-term goals that help an athlete reach his or her ultimate dream. Once completed, the athlete can refer to this goal-setting plan to help stay focused on his or her goals. But, after 6 months or a year have passed, the worksheet should be revisited so that goals can be updated to reflect the athlete's continued development and progress.

Q: What role do you think parents should play in their child's performance?

A: Without at least minimal parental support, I do not believe a young athlete can be successful in sport. This minimal support includes things like allowing the child to play, signing the child up for a team, and providing transportation. However, a parent who provides additional support that is positive in nature can greatly foster their child's ability to be successful in sport. This additional support may include being encouraging and supportive, helping their child to learn to deal with adversity and disappointment, teaching their child to strive for greatness, and nurturing their child's love for the sport. Parents who provide this positive support can play an important role in helping their child to achieve his or her goals.

On the other hand, there are many parents who actually hinder their child's ability to be successful in sport—they do this in a variety of ways such as emphasizing winning over skill development; negatively criticizing their child's performance; and putting their needs, expectations, and goals ahead of their child's. Although some children are extremely resilient and can be successful in spite of their parents, many will not be able to successfully navigate their way to sport success when faced with such negative influence.

As a last note, although parents may be the most likely people to provide positive support to their child, young athletes often find this type of support in an older sibling, a family friend, a school teacher or administrator, or a member of the coaching staff. Certainly, the young athlete who is surrounded by supportive adults is better positioned for success than the young athlete who is influenced negatively by adults around him or her.

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This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: A conversation with Jennifer L. Etnier, author of *Bring Your "A" Game: A Young Athlete's Guide to Mental Toughness* (University of North Carolina Press, December 2009). The text of this interview is available at www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/etnier/.

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