

Be Prepared

By Linda Lee (Canada)



If bridge is really a sport, then it's logical that bridge players can learn from other athletes how to prepare for an event such as the World Bridge Olympiad.

Some people no doubt believe that sports psychologists are only a small step above witchdoctors, but many elite athletes are now using them to improve their performances.

Before this Olympiad I decided to work with one. I will find out during this event how much it has helped.

What is the goal of this type of preparation? There are several: to manage performance anxiety, to achieve peak performance, to manage all the problems that can occur when you are playing.

The techniques that we worked on included relaxation techniques, clearing the decks, visualization, goal setting, pre-game preparation and developing specific plans to handle in-game "situations."

Are you having trouble sleeping during the tournament? Are you over-anxious before your play? Relaxation can help. I was rather surprised when the psychologist (who generally worked with track and field athletes and tennis players) was able to describe exactly the physical symptoms I experience before a session.

The symptoms are universal and cross all sports. They are caused by the release of four different hormones and are part of your body's "fight or flight" mechanism. They signal that your body is ready for what is to come. In order to perform at your best, you have to control these feelings, but not eliminate them completely – it's important to be keyed up and ready, just not too much.

Here is a brief summary of a few of the techniques I learned that you may be able to put to immediate use.

1. Are there any extraneous problems that are affecting your game? These may be difficulties with relationships, job problems, family problems or even team problems. You definitely don't want to let these issues affect you while you play.

Try to imagine some kind of locked box. This might be a chest, a safe — whatever works for you. It should have a lock and you should be able to open it later. Take all your problems one by one and mentally put them into the box. When this is all done, lock the box. Promise yourself that later you will go and open the box and remove the problems again. You are not abandoning them, just putting them aside for now.

2. If you need to relax, start with focusing on your breathing. You breathe from your diaphragm, in through

your nose and out through your mouth. Anyone who has studied yoga will be familiar with a variety of breathing techniques. While this is going on you visualize something calming: a color, a scene. Then you walk through a relaxation script. It seems to work best if someone else runs through the script for you, although you can do it for yourself.

The one we worked on involves progressively relaxing parts of your body starting from your head and working down to your toes. You can buy tapes of relaxation scripts at major bookstores. With a lot of practice, you learn what it feels like to relax and you can reach this state quickly when you need to. In general, relaxation is something that does require practice.

3. Goal setting is also helpful. Why are you here? Why are you playing in this event? When you set goals, don't just set team goals. You don't have control over achieving these goals and this can be frustrating, so set some individual goals too. Is having fun one of your goals? Surprisingly perhaps, it wasn't one of mine. When things are most frustrating, remembering your goals may help. When you have to make choices, think about your goals: they may help you to make decisions.

4. Visualization is used in preparation for all sports. Familiarity makes situations easier to handle. You can prepare yourself for what is to come by visualizing it in advance.

Visualizing yourself doing well may help you to believe in yourself. Believing you can do something is a good part of actually doing it – *posse quam possunt*, as Virgil put it ("They can because they think they can."). Worried about fighting back when you are down in a match? Visualize yourself in that situation, and you will be more ready to deal with it when it happens.

5. Have some plans to deal with problem situations. What will you do when you have had a bad result? Let's say that you are angry at partner or yourself for making a serious error. Coaches in all sports teach the same basic approach: a) allow yourself to express anger; b) move to a neutral state; c) set up for the next hand.

At the bridge table you need a way to express anger: this might be writing something down on your scorecard, or talking to yourself, or getting up and getting some water.

Now blow the mental whistle or take a deep breath — use whatever 'Stop' signal works for you. Time to let go. Put it out of your mind. Then start to prepare for the next hand.

It is a good idea to have a similar plan for dealing with other problems that may occur – for example, your feelings when you have a series of bad results. Your plan might include dealing with the anger, remembering your goals, relaxation and then resetting.

My experience so far with sports psychology is limited, but I believe that it will help me perform better in bridge competition, and I intend to work more on it in the future.