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Enemy Mind

Your thoughts can derail your performance—but only if you let them.

By Ed Tseng

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David Brewer

Kyle Kasperbauer (front) looks inside himself in 2009 during the grueling sandbag-sprint event at the CrossFit Games.

“The human body is an incredible machine, but most people only get out of that machine what their mind allows them to.” —Rich Froning

Here are some common thoughts at CrossFit boxes all over the world:

“I can’t wait until this is over. I can’t sleep the night before a competition.”

1 of 6

"The countdown: There's no turning back. These are the most stressful 10 seconds of my day."

"The clock gives me instant anxiety, and it takes me a minute or two to get my focus back."

"This is exciting!"

"Let's do this!"

"I love to compete!"

What determines whether an athlete gets stressed or psyched before a competition?

The answer is in the six-inch CrossFit box between their ears.

As a mental performance coach, I see the mental game cause some athletes to break down and others to break through. I have spoken to gold medalists, national champions, world champions and CrossFit athletes regarding how they are able to access the zone-like state

consistently. Here's what I unearthed about the mentally fittest on Earth:

1. Thinking About Thoughts

The mentally fit don't concern themselves with their thinking.

We all have that little voice inside our head that pops up and says, "I can't do it." The greatest athletes in the world have that voice, too, but they know it's normal and part of competition, and they don't make a big deal of it. The funny thing is that when we don't pay attention to that interfering voice inside our heads, it doesn't tend to come around very often. And when it does, it doesn't stay long.

When you wake up from a nightmare and realize it was just a nightmare, do you stress over it? Of course not. It wasn't real. Well, dreams are thoughts when we're sleeping, so if we don't care about them when we're sleeping, why do we care about them when we're awake? Thoughts are not reality, but it feels like they are. We get what we focus on.



Colleen Baz

To maintain the right mindset, Libby DiBiase focuses on keeping things fun at all times.

CrossFit athlete Libby DiBiase once told me, “You don’t have to concern yourself with negative thoughts. If you are having fun, there’s no way you can experience the negative.”

**“If you are having fun, there’s
no way you can experience
the negative.”**

—Libby DiBiase

2. Doing What Needs to Be Done

The mentally fit know the five words that cause most people to fail: “I don’t feel like it.”

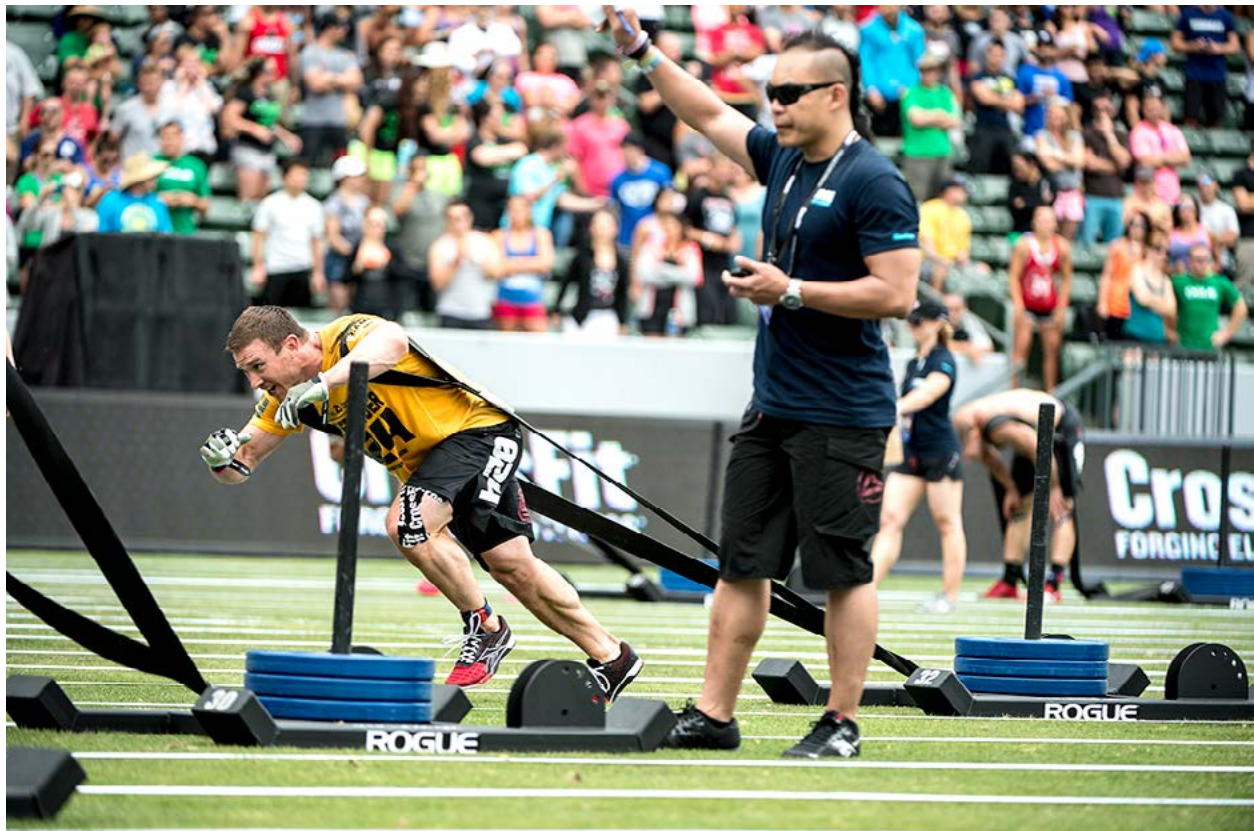
Kyle Kasperbauer, third overall in the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games, confessed there are many days when he doesn’t feel like training—but he trains anyway. There are times we don’t feel like training, eating clean or washing our workout clothes, but we don’t have to act how we feel.

It’s the start that stops most people. If you’re an actor on Broadway and the curtain is going up, you can’t say, “Wait, I’m not in the part yet.” You have to be in the part whether you feel like it or not. CrossFit (and life) is the same way. Great athletes do what they need to do when they need to do it whether they feel like it or not.

3. Pay Attention or Disregard?

The mentally fit don’t try to control their thoughts.

Have you ever been in a funk and tried to use positive thinking? Did it actually work? When we try to control our thinking it makes everything worse. Thoughts change on their own, and they change very quickly. Don’t believe me? Try to remember the last 10 thoughts you had. You can’t do it. That’s how quickly they change. We can’t control



Thomas Campitelli

A veteran Games competitor, Kasperbauer knows success in CrossFit is often more mental than physical.



Nicole Bedard

Christmas Abbott has found extensive preparation allows her to treat competition like another day of training.

which thoughts come into our heads, but we can decide which ones we give attention to and which ones we just let pass without judgment. Thoughts we give attention to can consume us, but those we allow to pass through have no power over us.

Athletes love my subway metaphor: If I'm in New York City on the subway platform waiting for the C train, can I control whether the A, B or D trains come into the station?

**"I've prepared thoroughly,
so I can take anything that is
thrown my way."**

—Christmas Abbott

No, but I control which train I get on. It doesn't make sense to get on the A train and let it take you for a ride in the wrong direction.

Our thoughts are the same: we can't control which ones come into our heads, but we can control which ones we give our attention to and which ones we dismiss.

CrossFit Invoke owner Christmas Abbott told me she treats competitions like any other day. In other words, every day is important, but no day is "special." When it's game day, the little voice inside Abbott's head is gone.

"I've prepared thoroughly, so I can take anything that is thrown my way," she said.

She also said, "Embrace the pain: that's where the magic happens."

In Kasperbauer's first CrossFit Games back in 2009, thoughts of doubt crept into his head after the 7-km run, which featured the steep hills of Aromas, Calif. He briefly rested, dismissed the thoughts and went right into the deadlift ladder. Nike has it right: Just do it.

4. Mastering the Mind

The mentally fit know that no external factor has any influence over us.

I've found many CrossFit athletes believe the following can hurt their performance: the clock, competitors who are stronger or more experienced, injury, failure, and teammates' reactions.

The truth is none of those things can affect how you feel. There is only one thing that can affect how you feel: your thoughts.

Imagine you are in a low mood and the clock is running down. How do you feel? Probably anxious. So it seems as if the clock is making you feel anxious. But let's take a different scenario: you are in the zone, your mood is high and you have extreme confidence, and the clock is running down. Do you feel the same way? Not at all. It's not a big deal to you, and you may even shift into a higher gear.

So it's not the clock that affects how you feel. It's 100 percent your thinking in the moment that affects how you feel. This is empowering for the athletes I work with. Instead of being prisoners of situations, they are in control because it's just thinking, and thinking comes from inside you, not outside you.

Here's an extreme example: Krystal Cantu was all set for her first competition on Aug. 17, 2013, but on Aug. 2 she got into a car accident and lost her right arm. One month later, she went back to the gym, and she re-learned how to do everything with her left hand, including eating, writing and driving. Six months later, she earned a CrossFit Level 1 Certificate.

"It was going to take some new technique, a hell of a lot more training and some sweat, but I was up for the challenge. What's life without a good challenge?" she said of her mindset.

It's not what's happening around you. It's not what's happening to you. What truly matters is what's happening inside you.

5. Relax Into the Zone

The mentally fit know the human mind defaults back to clarity and "the zone."

I get texts, Facebook messages, emails and phone calls every week from athletes begging me to show them how to get into the zone. What these athletes don't realize is



Courtesy of Joe Ryan Schwabenger

After losing her arm in a car accident, Krystal Cantu relies on a positive attitude to overcome her challenges.

that the zone they seek is our true nature, and the only thing that can get in our way is our thinking.

I have an 8-month-old daughter, and she is always in the moment. Sure, she gets upset, but she gets over it very quickly. Was she trained to do that? No. It's natural for her. As we get older, we unfortunately tend to believe our ridiculous thinking, and we scare ourselves. And when we scare ourselves, we are tentative and tight and we act differently.

When my daughter begins to start walking and falls over, she will not think, "Damn, I didn't walk yesterday;" or, "What if I don't walk tomorrow?" She will keep at it, or, as Kasperbauer said, she will "stay on it." But as we get older, many of us get caught up in past failures or future anxiety. When we let our thoughts fall away, we are back in the moment, we feel at ease, and we kick major butt. In other words, the quickest way to get into the zone is to do nothing to get into the zone.



Nicole Bedard

All athletes experience doubt at times. The strong ones ignore it and choose to succeed.

A Few Closing Thoughts

Here's a question for you: Can you remember a time when you just dominated a workout? How did you do it?

I've asked thousands of athletes similar questions, and the answer is always something like this: "I don't know. I just did it. I wasn't thinking about it."

On the other hand, can you remember a time when you had a terrible performance? What thoughts did you have then?

The thoughts were probably something like this: "I was analyzing what was going wrong. I had no confidence and lacked focus. I was totally in my head."

The great baseball philosopher Yogi Berra once said, "You can't think and hit at the same time. A full mind is an empty bat." The same is true for CrossFit.

Whatever thought we have, we experience it, even if it is absolutely untrue.

Here are some interfering thoughts:

DiBiase: "Oh, crap. Who's here? Who am I going against? How am I going to do?"

Abbott: "I want to quit. Why am I doing this?"

Kasperbauer: "Maybe I can't do this."

Cantu: "Prepare to be last. You don't compare to these athletes."

We all have negative thoughts at times, but the peak performers are the ones who don't concern themselves with those thoughts. This is why they are able to dominate those who are equally fit physically. The mental game is the missing link for most athletes.

Some people say, "Don't believe everything you hear."

I say, "Don't believe everything you think."

When you don't concern yourself with unnecessary thoughts, you will naturally have more productive thoughts, perhaps something like this:

"I'm the baddest bitch in this place." —Christmas Abbott



About the Author

Ed Tseng is the mental performance consultant at *CrossFit Mercer* in New Jersey and a best-selling author. He works with athletes, business leaders and students on how to do their best when it means the most. His book, *Game. Set. Life.—Peak Performance for Sports and Life* has been on Amazon's Top 10 and is featured annually at the U.S. Open. For more info, visit Edtseng.com.