



A WHITEPAPER — FOR ATHLETES, COACHES & PERFORMANCE TRAINERS

# Meditation for *Athletes* & Performance.

*A practical, evidence-informed guide to training attention, working with competitive pressure, and recovering well.*

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**FOR**

Athletes ·  
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### HOW TO USE THIS WHITEPAPER

Read it start to finish, or jump straight to Section 06 for practices and Section 07 for a ready-made two-week plan. Every claim in Section 12 is sourced so you can verify it yourself.

# 01 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## A grounded case for training the athletic mind.

Most athletic training targets the body: strength, conditioning, technique, and recovery protocols are planned and measured in detail. The mind that has to execute under pressure, hold attention through fatigue, and recover from a mistake mid-competition is trained far less deliberately, if at all. Two published sport-psychology approaches, tested in controlled research rather than invented for this paper, offer a structured way to close that gap.

This whitepaper does not introduce a new branded method. It draws on Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE), developed by Kaufman, Glass, and Arnkoff, and the Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment approach (MAC), developed by Gardner and Moore, alongside Attentional Control Theory and Sian Beilock's research on choking under pressure.

Meditation for athletes is not a promise of better results. Used responsibly, it is a trainable set of attention and self-regulation skills that a real, if modest, body of research links to improved present-moment focus, a healthier relationship with mistakes, and better recovery between training loads.

*"An athlete who chokes under pressure has usually not lost skill. Their attention has shifted from the task to a running commentary about the task."*

— A CENTRAL PREMISE OF THIS PAPER

### Five Practices for the Athletic Mind — at a glance

| NO. | PRACTICE                            | PURPOSE                                                                 |
|-----|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Pre-Performance Breath Centering    | Settle physiological arousal before a competition or a demanding drill. |
| 2   | Present-Moment Attention Anchoring  | Return a wandering mind to the task, not to the score or the crowd.     |
| 3   | Non-Judgmental Response to Mistakes | Notice a mistake without the spiral of self-criticism that follows it.  |
| 4   | Body-Scan Recovery Check            | Read genuine fatigue and tension signals rather than override them.     |
| 5   | Deep Rest for Recovery              | Support genuine recovery between sessions, not a substitute for sleep.  |

## 02 WHY THIS MATTERS The mental training gap in sport.

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A youth swimmer can describe her stroke technique in detail but has never once been asked how she talks to herself after a bad lap. A club-level runner tracks his splits to the second but has no plan for the three minutes before the gun goes off, other than hoping the nerves settle on their own. This asymmetry, extensive physical training paired with almost no attention training, is the gap this whitepaper addresses.



**FIGURE 01** A MOMENT OF PRE-PERFORMANCE SETTLING

### How an untrained mind shows up in competition

A single mistake spirals into a lost second half

Attention jumps to the scoreboard instead of the next play

Pre-competition nerves feel unmanageable rather than useful

Recovery days are spent scrolling rather than actually resting

Good performances happen despite the mental game, not because of it

A setback in one event carries into the next one

#### WHY THIS MATTERS

The original Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE) study by Kaufman, Glass, and Arnkoff (2009) trained archers and golfers over six weeks and found meaningful improvements in state mindfulness and a reduction in sport-specific anxiety. <sup>[1]</sup> The gap is real, but so is the evidence that structured attention training helps close it.

# 03

## DEFINITIONS

### What mental training is, and is not.

Mental training for sport is a specific, trainable skill: noticing where attention has gone, and returning it to the task on purpose, along with a deliberate, non-judgmental way of responding to a mistake. It is not a diagnosis, a substitute for coaching, and not a guarantee of a personal best.

| TERM                       | WHAT IT MEANS HERE                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MSPE                       | Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement, a structured programme developed by Kaufman, Glass, and Arnkoff combining mindfulness meditation with sport-specific attention exercises.                                           |
| MAC approach               | Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment, developed by Gardner and Moore, an approach rooted in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) that trains acceptance of difficult internal states rather than trying to eliminate them. |
| Attentional Control Theory | Eysenck and colleagues' account of how anxiety narrows and destabilises attention, pulling it toward threat-related information and away from the task at hand.                                                            |
| Choking under pressure     | A drop in performance under high-stakes conditions, studied extensively by Sian Beilock, often linked to over-monitoring of well-learned skills that should run automatically.                                             |

#### What it is NOT

- A substitute for a coach, physiotherapist, or sport psychologist
- A guarantee of a personal best or a podium finish
- A relaxation technique meant to eliminate all nerves

#### What it CAN be

- A trainable skill for returning attention to the task on purpose
- A structured way to work with, not suppress, competitive nerves
- A genuine support for recovery between training loads

# 04

## THE RESEARCH

# Why present-moment training helps under pressure.

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Present-moment training works by giving an athlete repeated, low-stakes reps at one specific move: noticing that attention or self-talk has drifted away from the task, then returning it. That single move is a direct rehearsal of the exact skill needed when a bad call, a dropped pass, or a missed shot threatens to spiral into the rest of the competition.

### 4.1 · The original MSPE trial

Kaufman, Glass, and Arnkoff introduced Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement in a 2009 study of archers and golfers, combining mindfulness meditation with sport-specific attention exercises across a six-week programme. Participants reported significant increases in state mindfulness and flow, alongside reduced sport-anxiety, though the study used a small, non-randomised sample and did not find a significant change in objective performance scores. <sup>[1]</sup>

### 4.2 · A larger follow-up with self-reported gains

A 2011 study by Thompson, Kaufman, De Petrillo, Glass, and Arnkoff extended MSPE to a broader athlete sample and again found improvements in mindfulness, flow state, and a reduction in sport-related worry, alongside athletes' own reports of improved performance, an important distinction from objectively measured results. <sup>[2]</sup>

### 4.3 · The MAC approach and acceptance

Gardner and Moore's Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment approach, rooted in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, takes a related but distinct route: rather than training an athlete to eliminate nervousness or self-doubt, it trains acceptance of those states while staying committed to values-based action on the field. <sup>[3]</sup>

### 4.4 · Why anxiety narrows attention

Eysenck and colleagues' Attentional Control Theory (2007) explains part of the mechanism: anxiety reduces an athlete's control over where their attention goes, pulling it toward threat-related cues like the scoreboard, the opponent, or an internal monitor of their own performance, at the direct expense of the task itself. <sup>[4]</sup>

### 4.5 · Choking is an attention problem, not a skill problem

Sian Beilock's research on skilled performers, including a widely cited study on experienced golfers, found that explicitly monitoring a well-learned motor skill, forcing conscious attention onto movements that should run automatically, degrades performance under pressure. This reframes choking as an attention-management failure rather than a talent failure, which is precisely the skill present-moment training targets. <sup>[5]</sup>

# 05

## THE PRACTICES

# Five practices for the athletic mind.

These five practices are deliberately plain and numbered, not a branded acronym. Each one targets a specific moment in an athlete's day: before performing, during performance, immediately after a mistake, during a body check, and during recovery.

### BEFORE PERFORMANCE

#### 1 · Breath Centering

2–5 minutes

Slow, even breathing to settle physiological arousal before stepping onto the field, court, or start line.

### DURING PERFORMANCE

#### 2 · Attention Anchoring

Ongoing, in-the-moment

A single cue, breath, footfall, or ball, used to pull a wandering mind back to the task, not the score.

### AFTER A MISTAKE

#### 3 · Non-Judgmental Response

10–30 seconds

Naming the mistake once, without the spiral of self-criticism that otherwise follows it into the next play.

### DURING A BODY CHECK

#### 4 · Body-Scan Recovery Check

3–10 minutes

A brief scan for genuine fatigue or tension signals, used to decide whether to push, adapt, or stop a session.

### DURING RECOVERY

#### 5 · Deep Rest

10–20 minutes

A guided rest practice, such as Yoga Nidra, used to support recovery between training loads, never as a substitute for sleep.

# 06

IN DETAIL

## The five practices, step by step.

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### 6.1 · Pre-Performance Breath Centering

**Step 1.** Find a still moment, on the bench, at the start line, in the tunnel.

**Step 2.** Inhale for a slow count of four through the nose.

**Step 3.** Exhale for a slow count of six, letting the shoulders drop.

**Step 4.** Repeat for four to six full breaths, no more.

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### 6.2 · Present-Moment Attention Anchoring

Choose one small, sport-specific anchor in advance, the seam of the ball, the sound of footfall, the feel of the grip, and return to it deliberately each time attention drifts to the scoreboard, an opponent's reaction, or a replay of the last point.

### 6.3 · Non-Judgmental Response to Mistakes

Name the mistake once, in plain language, missed shot, and let it end there rather than following it with a chain of self-critical commentary. This is a direct, trainable application of the MAC approach's acceptance principle: the mistake is acknowledged, not argued with, and attention returns to the next action.

### 6.4 · Body-Scan Recovery Check

Lying or sitting quietly, move attention slowly from the feet upward, noticing genuine tightness, soreness, or heaviness without immediately trying to fix it. This is a decision-support tool, not a diagnosis, and a training plan should still involve a coach or physiotherapist for any persistent pain.

### 6.5 · Deep Rest for Recovery

A guided deep-rest practice such as Yoga Nidra can support the subjective sense of recovery between demanding training blocks. It is a complement to sleep, not a replacement for it, and should never be used to justify chronically shortened sleep.

# 07

## GETTING STARTED

### A 2-week starter plan.

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This plan is deliberately light. The goal in the first two weeks is consistency, not intensity, since research on MSPE and related programmes consistently uses training windows of several weeks, not a single session.

#### 1-4 Days 1-4 · Learn the anchor

Practice Breath Centering before every training session, even short ones. Choose and rehearse one attention anchor for competition.

#### 5-7 Days 5-7 · Add the mistake response

Begin practicing the Non-Judgmental Response to Mistakes in low-stakes training reps, before using it in competition.

#### 8-11 Days 8-11 · Bring it into competition

Use Breath Centering before a real competition or scrimmage, and the attention anchor during it. Note what happened afterward, without judgment.

#### 12-14 Days 12-14 · Add recovery practices

Introduce the Body-Scan Recovery Check after a hard session, and a short Deep Rest practice on a rest day. Review the two weeks with a coach if possible.

#### A NOTE ON PACE

If two weeks is not enough, that is normal. The published MSPE programme runs for six full weeks. This starter plan is a beginning, not a finished protocol.

# 08

FOR THE SUPPORT TEAM

## Guidance for coaches and parents.

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A coach or parent shapes an athlete's relationship with pressure and mistakes more than any single practice does. These five points support, rather than replace, the athlete's own mental training.

- **Model the response you want to see.** An athlete watches how a coach reacts to a bad call far more closely than they listen to instructions about staying calm.
  - **Separate the debrief from the moment.** A tactical mistake deserves review later, calmly, not a real-time reaction that teaches the athlete to fear errors.
  - **Protect recovery time as seriously as training time.** Treat sleep and rest days as part of the programme, not an optional extra to sacrifice for one more session.
  - **Do not frame mindfulness as a performance guarantee.** Presenting it as a personal-best guarantee sets up disappointment and undermines trust in the practice itself.
  - **Watch for signs that go beyond ordinary nerves.** Persistent dread, panic, or avoidance of competition warrants a conversation with a psychologist or physician, not just a breathing exercise.
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# 09

## UNDER PRESSURE

### Working with choking under pressure.

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Beilock's research offers a specific, practical insight: choking often happens because an athlete starts consciously monitoring a skill that should be running automatically, over-thinking a golf swing or a free throw mid-motion. <sup>[5]</sup> The fix is not to think harder about technique in the moment. It is to redirect attention to a simple external anchor, the target, the seam of the ball, and let the trained movement run.



**FIGURE 02** ATTENTION RETURNED TO A SIMPLE, EXTERNAL ANCHOR

#### **A practical sequence for a high-pressure moment**

One slow exhale, one glance at the chosen external anchor, one cue word if that helps, then the action itself. This sequence is short by design; a pressure moment is not the time for a long practice, only a well-rehearsed, brief one.

## Recovery as part of training, not apart from it.

Recovery is frequently the most neglected part of an athlete's programme, treated as unstructured downtime rather than a trained skill in its own right. The Body-Scan Recovery Check and Deep Rest practices in this whitepaper are meant to be scheduled with the same seriousness as a strength session.

| SIGNAL                                  | WHAT IT MAY MEAN                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Persistent heaviness in the legs</b> | Possible accumulated fatigue; a conversation with a coach about load may be warranted before pushing through.                          |
| <b>Racing thoughts at bedtime</b>       | Common before competition; a brief Deep Rest practice may help, though ongoing sleep disruption deserves its own attention.            |
| <b>Dread about the next session</b>     | Worth naming out loud to a coach or parent rather than pushing through silently; this can be an early sign of overtraining or burnout. |

### A NOTE ON YOGA NIDRA AND SLEEP

A guided rest practice such as Yoga Nidra can support a subjective sense of restedness and may aid recovery between sessions, but it is not equivalent to sleep and should never be used to justify a shortened night's sleep before or during a competition period.

# 11

## COMMON QUESTIONS

### Frequently asked questions.

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#### **Does meditation actually improve athletic performance?**

The honest answer is that the evidence is real but modest, and mostly self-reported rather than measured in objective performance scores. Published MSPE studies find consistent gains in mindfulness, flow, and reduced sport-anxiety; gains in objectively measured performance are less consistently demonstrated.

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#### **What is MSPE, and do I need a therapist to use it?**

Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement is a structured, published six-week programme combining mindfulness meditation with sport-specific attention exercises. The original research used trained facilitators, but the plain practices in this whitepaper can be started independently; a sport psychologist can offer more structured support.

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#### **What is the MAC approach, and how is it different from MSPE?**

The Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment approach, rooted in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, focuses specifically on accepting difficult internal states like nervousness rather than trying to eliminate them, while staying committed to value-driven action. MSPE and MAC overlap heavily and are often discussed together in the sport-psychology literature.

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#### **Can this help with choking under pressure?**

Sian Beilock's research suggests choking is often an attention problem, over-monitoring a well-learned skill, rather than a skill or talent problem. Present-moment training that redirects attention to a simple external anchor targets this mechanism directly, though it will not eliminate pressure itself.

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#### **Can meditation replace a coach, physiotherapist, or sport psychologist?**

No. These practices are a complement to, never a substitute for, qualified coaching, physiotherapy, or licensed sport psychology support, especially for persistent anxiety, injury, or performance concerns that go beyond ordinary competitive nerves.

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#### **How long before an athlete notices a difference?**

The published MSPE programme runs six full weeks; the two-week starter plan in this whitepaper is a beginning, not a complete protocol. Consistency across weeks matters more than the intensity of any single session.

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#### **Is Yoga Nidra useful for athletes, and is it the same as sleep?**

A guided deep-rest practice such as Yoga Nidra may support a subjective sense of recovery between demanding training blocks. It is not a substitute for actual sleep and should never be used to justify shortening sleep before or during competition.

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## Evidence base, limitations, and responsible claims.

Kaufman, Glass, and Arnkoff (2009) introduced MSPE with archers and golfers over six weeks, finding gains in state mindfulness and flow and a reduction in sport-anxiety, though the sample was small and non-randomised and objective performance gains were not clearly demonstrated. <sup>[1]</sup> Thompson, Kaufman, De Petrillo, Glass, and Arnkoff (2011) extended this work with a broader sample, again finding self-reported gains in mindfulness and reduced worry. <sup>[2]</sup> Gardner and Moore's MAC approach, described across several publications, frames acceptance of difficult internal states, rather than their elimination, as central to sustained performance. <sup>[3]</sup> Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos, and Calvo's Attentional Control Theory (2007) explains how anxiety narrows and redirects attention toward threat-related cues. <sup>[4]</sup> Beilock's research on skilled performers found that explicit, conscious monitoring of a well-learned motor skill degrades its execution under pressure. <sup>[5]</sup> A 2018 systematic review by Buhlmayer, Birrer, Rothlin, Faude, and Donath examined mindfulness-based interventions in sport and found generally positive but heterogeneous effects across a still-developing body of research. <sup>[6]</sup>

### WHAT THE HOLISTIC CARE CAN RESPONSIBLY SAY

Structured present-moment training may support real gains in sport-specific mindfulness, flow, and self-reported anxiety, and offers a plausible, theory-supported approach to the specific mechanism behind choking under pressure. It works best as a sustained, multi-week practice built alongside good coaching, not a substitute for it.

### WHAT SHOULD BE AVOIDED

Claiming meditation guarantees a personal best, replaces a coach, physiotherapist, or sport psychologist, eliminates competitive nerves entirely, or works identically for every athlete regardless of their sport or their reason for struggling under pressure.

# Notice. Return.

## *Train the mind, one session at a time.*

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*An athlete who chokes under pressure has usually not lost skill. Their attention has shifted from the task to a running commentary about the task. Center the breath, anchor attention to the task, respond to a mistake without judgment, check the body honestly, and rest deeply enough to actually recover.*

[1] Kaufman KA, Glass CR, Arnkoff DB. Evaluation of Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE): A New Approach to Promote Flow in Athletes. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, 2009.

[2] Thompson RW, Kaufman KA, De Petrillo LA, Glass CR, Arnkoff DB. One Year Follow-Up of Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE) With Archers, Golfers, and Runners. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, 2011.

[3] Gardner FL, Moore ZE. *The Psychology of Enhancing Human Performance: The Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment (MAC) Approach*. Springer, 2007.

[4] Eysenck MW, Derakshan N, Santos R, Calvo MG. Anxiety and Cognitive Performance: Attentional Control Theory. *Emotion*, 2007.

[5] Beilock SL, Carr TH. On the Fragility of Skilled Performance: What Governs Choking Under Pressure? *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 2001.

[6] Buhlmayer L, Birrer D, Rothlin P, Faude O, Donath L. Effects of Mindfulness Practice on Performance-Relevant Parameters and Performance Outcomes in Sports: A Systematic Review. *Sports Medicine*, 2018.