

HEAD STRONG

Gain the mental muscle of five sporting champions - and discover the mind tricks guaranteed to build a winning mentality

When your mind is on your side, you can win more football games, putt more balls on the green and shave more than a minute off your 5K. If you don't believe that sport - and more importantly winning - is a thinking man's pursuit, how did the robotically consistent Tiger Woods mutate into the erratic, anxiety-plagued shadow he was last year? How can Wayne Rooney strike 19 goals in 15 games, then fail to score from open play in 12 matches?

"The mind can be a positive or destructive force," says English Institute of Sport Performance psychologist Pete Lindsay. So we asked leading sports psychologists to unpick the mental DNA of elite athletes to reveal the essential tools to keep you at your brilliant best.

Get a tennis mind to smash your opposition



SERVE AN ACE IN 'THE ZONE'
Andy Murray

- Most successful British tennis player of the Open era
- Winner of 16 ATP titles

"Andy is a 'flow' player," explains Andy Barton, sports psychologist at thesportingmind.com. "When things go wrong, he can suffer from pressure and anxiety, which releases the stress hormone cortisol. The key is learning how to combat pressure."


PRESCRIPTION

Strain for gains Use pressure training to change your response when you're in those tight spots. "We make boxers train in smaller rings to prepare for that feeling of tension when the heat's on," explains Lindsay. Practise playing tennis on half the court or taking penalties from 15 yards instead of the normal 12. When a big moment arrives, you can crush your nerves and seize victory.

Trigger a comeback Dramatic revivals of form aren't down to luck, says co-author of *Inside Sport Psychology* Dr Costas Karageorghis. Before a game, visualise a turnaround in your fortunes while listening to an uplifting song, then listen to it again during a changeover or at half-time. "Your mind will connect the music with a positive mood,"

OFF-FIELD ADVANTAGE

If you seize up when there's too much to do, hit the quick jobs first. 'Flow' works when your brain gets instant feedback, so rattling through smaller tasks gives you the rhythm to get more done.

SCORE WITH YOUR HEAD 

A simple trick will help you power past your mistakes instead of wallowing



THINK LESS, WIN MORE
Ian Bell

- Has hit 12 Test centuries as an England batsman
- Three-time Ashes winner

"An introverted character like Bell can have intense internal motivation," says Andy Barton. "It makes him very methodical, ticking off checklists in his head and endlessly honing his technique. Bell examines every detail, including swinging his bat on the walk to the crease. If this leads to perfectionism, an athlete can become *too* self-critical."

PRESCRIPTION

Fast refocus A simple trick will help you power past mistakes instead of wallowing, says Lindsay, just stop and count steadily to five. This creates head-space between you and the error; telling your brain to stop fretting and move on. "Some golfers pick up blades of grass and let them blow away to symbolically 'release' a poor shot." Batsmen can do the same by crushing any of their miss-hits under loose turf.

Move the goal posts To avoid stubborn perfectionism and the accompanying funk, set 'process goals' such as improving a certain shot, rather than 'outcome' goals like averaging 50 runs for the season. "Focusing on smaller processes you can control will reduce that fear of failure," says Lindsay. Soon you'll be hitting sixes and cover drives that endanger fielders' shin bones.

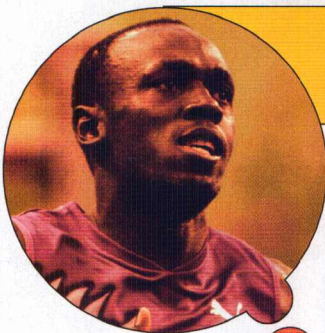
OFF-FIELD ADVANTAGE

When dithering over a decision, identify the most important *factor* to help limit the time you deliberate over it.



Use our tips to get a head in cricket

CRICKET BAT, PADS AND GLOVES PUMA CRICKET.COM; TROUSERS AND TRAINERS LACOSTE.CO.UK; T-SHIRT SHOP.ARIDAS.CO.UK; CABLE VEST TOMMY HILFGER, UK.TOMMY.COM; STUMPS SLAZENGER.COM; GOLF ROSSA GOLF CLUB URBANGOLF.CO.UK; TROUSERS SHOP.ARIDAS.CO.UK; T-SHIRT LACOSTE.CO.UK; GLOVE AND BALL DUNLOPSPORT.COM; BROGUES TOMMY HILFGER, UK.TOMMY.COM



SEAL GOLD WITH A CONFIDENCE TRICK
Usain Bolt

- World and Olympic gold medallist sprinter at 100m, 200m and 4x100m relay
- World records in all three events

"An 'extrovert' in sport takes their motivation from the environment around them, such as the crowd," says Lindsay. "These characters are also more susceptible to distraction, get bored easily and lose motivation."

PRESCRIPTION

Centre yourself "Diaphragmatic breathing gives your brain a third more oxygen," says

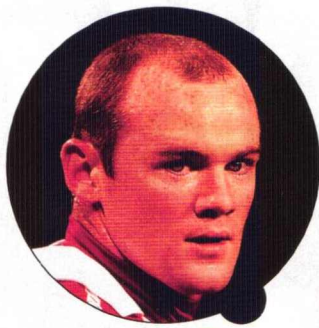
Lindsay. Put one hand on your chest and one on your stomach. Breathe in for four seconds and out for eight – only the hand on your stomach should move.

Train in tandem Using a friend or training partner will prevent boredom because it gives confident athletes something to beat. "It's a great way to keep extroverts motivated," says Steve Bull, former England cricket

team psychologist and author of *The Game Plan*. There are physical benefits, too. A study by the University of Oxford also showed that rowers who trained in groups could tolerate twice as much pain as solo exercisers.

OFF-FIELD ADVANTAGE

Keep things interesting by tracking your sales and trying to beat your PB each week.



TAP INTO YOUR WARRIOR SPIRIT

Wayne Rooney

- Three-time Premier League winner
- Youngest-ever England goalscorer

“Rooney’s sense of invincibility is a consequence of his immense self-belief,” Barton says. “He focuses on what he can do rather than on his limitations. The flip side is that he can often get frustrated by outcomes which don’t match his self-belief and this causes aggression.”

THE PRESCRIPTION

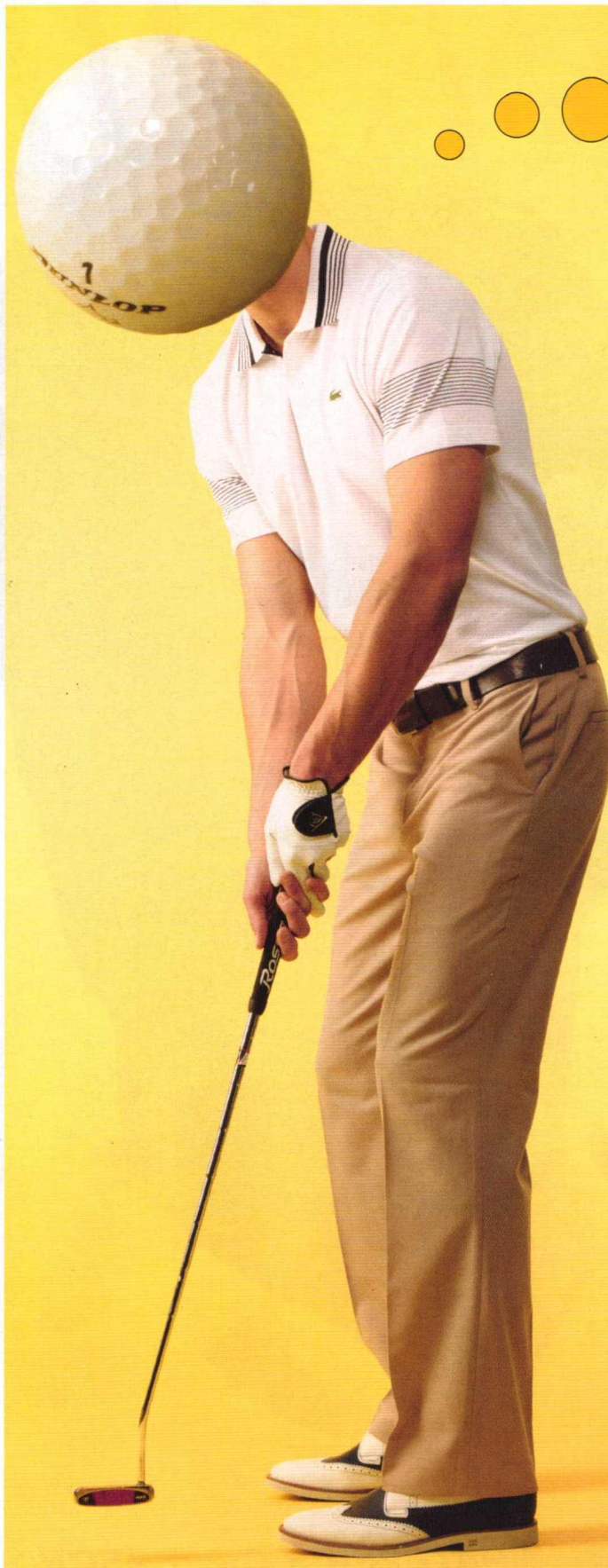
Leash your confidence Self-belief is empowering, but straying into overconfidence will cause you to take risks and make poor decisions – on-field and off.

To stay in control, use regular in-game reality checks to keep your brain rational, like counting your completed passes or analysing your opponent’s gameplan. This will effectively rewire your brain so logic wins out.

Harness the rage If you feel your blood boiling during the heat of the six-yard box, conjure up a prepared mental image, such as an ice cube. “This is the equivalent of a ‘post-hypnotic suggestion’, which therapists make during hypnosis to trigger positive emotions later on,” explains Karageorghis. It will remind you to cool down and focus on tactics instead of your opponent’s metatarsal.

OFF-FIELD ADVANTAGE

Quell aggression with rational tasks, like estimating the number of people around you.



BELIEVE IN BETTER FORM

Tiger Woods



- Youngest-ever golfer to win the PGA grand slam
- 71PGA victories, the third highest in history

“At the 2006 Open Championship, Woods used his driver only once, because he felt that playing with irons off the tee was statistically the best way to manage risk (he hit the fairway 92% of the time),” says Lindsay. “He’s a rational analyser – a scientist – but, following his off-field issues, he might struggle to understand his dip in form.”

THE PRESCRIPTION

Get a lucky charm When logic fails you, turning to superstition can actually get your averages up again. “Put a sticker on your watch and every time you take a good shot, close your eyes and rub it,” says David Fletcher consultant psychologist to the British Olympic Association. “When you are struggling, rubbing that sticker will help you regain that confidence.” Use the same trick on your driver or your boot laces if you’re a footballer: research at the University of Cologne found that activating a superstition or lucky charm increases performance.

Use feeling “We remember things based on emotion,” explains Barton. “If you celebrate a good shot with a fist pump, you will remember it and feel confident. If you react angrily to anything, you will feel anxious.” Only attach emotional or physical responses to positive outcomes and you’ll hit the rough less often, no matter what’s been going on off the course.

OFF-FIELD ADVANTAGE

Give your desk a triumphant thump every time you make a breakthrough at work to boost productivity. **MB**

The right thinking will ensure you have a ball

