Mental Skills for Young Athletes: A Mental Skills Workbook for Athletes

By John M. Hogg. Copyright 1997 by Sport Excel Publishing Inc., P.O. Box 67045, Edmonton, AB, T5R 5Y3, Canada.

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John Hogg’s book, Mental Skills for Young Athletes, is designed to fill one of the most glaring voids in the mental training literature—an age-appropriate mental training workbook for athletes age 12 and under. In this well-written book, John Hogg and his animal friends guide young athletes through self-exploration and learning activities designed to enhance mental skills. Hogg has used his extensive experiences in coaching and sport psychology to create this well-organized, 152-page, spiral-bound workbook, which combines thoughtful narratives and dialogues with age-appropriate activities designed to help young athletes understand, use, and enjoy the mental training information. In the foreword, Wayne Gretzky adds superstar name recognition to enhance receptivity to the mental component of training and competition. The chapter-by-chapter format can be followed sequentially or used to target specific mental training issues as they occur.

Although this book is designed to be self directed, guidelines for coaches and parents as well as a suggested reading list are provided in the appendices. The organization of the book is functional yet creative. Through the help of numerous animal athlete characters, each of the 10 chapters focuses on a specific mental skill and its importance to peak performance. Topics covered include goal setting, self-awareness and self-confidence, relaxation and energization, self-talk, creative imagery, attentional control skills, team harmony, and ideal performance and emotional states. Competitive creatures taking part in the “9th Annual Allcomers Animals Games” present a wide array of opinions, problems, and ideas regarding the psychological side of training and competing. Each chapter begins with a 3- to 5-page narrative, with the animal athletes talking about the focal mental skill. The importance, worth, and nature of each skill are explored through a discussion among competitors representing various team and individual sports. Several pages of activities designed to stimulate self-exploration and discussion follow each narrative.

The style of the text is definitely kid oriented, designed to grab and maintain the interest of young athletes. The friendly nature of the characters provides an inviting and understandable way to introduce young athletes to the complex ideas of mental preparation. Every page includes drawings of the various animals in their sport uniforms, which can be colored. Ollie Owl offers words of wisdom about mental training for the season ahead. The cast of characters is large and provides many personalities, personal opinions, and problems that adolescents can
easily identify with and learn from through a journey of self-discovery and development. Children should be able to see parts of themselves in characters like Ricky Rat, Charlie Cheetah, and Manny Moose. A wide variety of simple and fun activities, including word searches, word scrambles, crossword puzzles, drawing exercises, and matching tasks, accompany each chapter to accommodate different learning styles. Clear examples are provided, often utilizing a character from the proceeding story to share a difficult concept or convey an abstract meaning.

This book contributes to the applied sport psychology literature in three ways. It targets a neglected audience, athletes under age 12; maintains a broad enough focus to appeal to a wide variety of sports; and facilitates learning and implementation. Along with some of Terry Orlick's pioneering work, this is one of the few texts that target young athletes. While most sport psychologists recognize that athletes are less interested in mental training until they master the physical skills of a sport, it is not only feasible but desirable for this population, particularly when the few key mental skills targeted are "life skills" as well as those for sport. The book is also targeted at a diverse sport audience. Examples include athletes from a wide variety of sports to help maintain generic appeal. Thus, coaches, parents, and athletes from almost any sport should find this workbook applicable to them. Finally, the entertaining design and presentation format provide a great vehicle for teaching young athletes about mental training. More importantly, they also provide a step-by-step approach for developing, and in some cases implementing, these mental skills.

Although this text is well designed to educate young athletes about mental skills, the workbook is weak on acquisition and practice strategies for psychological skill development. However, no single book can be expected to meet all needs. Future companion publications would be beneficial to provide specific practice exercises to fill this gap.

Few materials in the applied sport psychology literature provide simple, concise, workbook-style activities that can be self directed or leader organized, such as those found in this new book. The exercises can be modified to allow for use with older athletes and other participation levels. Future development of a series of such workbooks for various sports, ages, and competition levels would be an incredible addition to the resources available to athletes, coaches, parents, and sport psychologists. The format and style have further application in injury rehabilitation and career termination situations.

Our only major criticisms of Hogg's book revolve around the issues of cognitive developmental suitability and the appropriateness of the elite competitive focus. Young athletes under age 12 may not benefit from some of these ideas about mental training, due to personal cognitive developmental factors. Young competitors may not have the attention span, maturity, or cognitive skills needed to comprehend, interpret, and utilize the importance of the skills presented. The highly specialized nature of the workbook makes it an excellent tool for competitive athletes age 12 and under. Yet, the specialization for elite adolescent athletes is a definite downfall. Repeatedly, the animal competitors discuss becoming "super athletes" and reaching the next level of elite competition. Unfortunately, the idea of becoming a super athlete is not realistic for all competitors, even those involved in highly competitive sports. Ollie Owl is presented as the only noncompetitive sport participant, and his involvement in the story dialogues is limited. Sadly, little to no mention or discussion is given to the idea of "being all you can be" and