This book aims to explore the contribution made by mental toughness to sporting achievement. It introduces the concept of mental toughness through a series of anecdotes and references by contemporary sports people and then discusses why mental toughness can be measured and developed by athletes in training for competition. The book is aimed at undergraduate students and lecturers of sport psychology and competitive sportspeople who are keen to develop their performance.

Chapter 1 introduces the notion of a winning mindset and its relationship to personality. The author uses a wealth of anecdotal evidence from high-profile sportspeople, coaches, and journalists to emphasize the importance of mental toughness in success at the highest levels of sport. Although there is an impressive list of credible support for the importance of the mental toughness ingredient, some of the key concepts are used rather interchangeably. Whilst there is general agreement about the importance of mental skills in sport, the importance of personality, personality profile or personality characteristics has been shown to be slightly more equivocal. The case of mental toughness is well made though, and there is an interesting debate about the philosophy of winning in sport and how it may develop with athletic experience.

Chapter 2 aims to define and characterise the content of mental toughness in relation to published work. Some of the conclusions are drawn from anecdotal testimony and from personality profiles, an approach that is somewhat controversial given the view that mental toughness may be a collection of mental skills, rather than a personality type or characteristic. However, the chapter does conclude that mental toughness can best be thought of as a state of mind to be adopted by athletes in training and competition and this clarifies the situation satisfactorily. The author discusses the specificity of mental toughness between different sport contexts and characterises mental toughness as a “moderator of the stress response”.

Chapter 3 considers the phenomenon of mental toughness from a more theoretical perspective. Although the first section of the book spent time outlining the nature of the mental toughness phenomenon in a popular style, the author now considers the theoretical backgrounds that may explain the efficacy of mental toughness in competitive frameworks. The book links mental toughness to the transtheoretical model, the cognitive-affective processing system, and personality theory. This section of the chapter would be of particular interest to sport psychology lecturers and consultants who like to reflect on their own theoretical stance to support work. The chapter also explores the likelihood that the mental toughness is a mindset that can yield benefits beyond sport and clinical settings.

In Chapter 4, the author explores the measurement of mental toughness and emphasizes the need for a valid and reliable method of assessment to test the efficacy of intervention programmes. The author reminds the reader of the very limited evidence to support a causal link between mental toughness and success in sport, and highlights the problems associated with predicting success in sport on the basis of mental skills application. The chapter reviews a number of contemporary questionnaires to assess mental toughness, including the Sports Performance Inventory, The Mental Toughness 48, and The Mental Toughness Scale, and compares them to the Psychological Performance Inventory. This section is particularly useful to undergraduate students who aim to develop their critical appraisal of journal articles that claim a link between mental skills and sports performance. The chapter concludes by outlining the development of the Sports Mental Toughness Questionnaire (SMTQ), which proposes the key subscales of confidence, constancy, and control in the measurement of mental toughness. While the chapter describes the confirmatory factor analysis, validity and reliability tests that have taken place to date, it also outlines the continuing validation work that is taking place in a range of different languages.

Chapter 5 emphasizes the importance of nurture in the development of mental toughness and outlines the developmental stages for acquiring a set of mental skills through the early middle and later stages of a competitive career. The author also discusses the importance of parental influence and the practice environment at an early stage and the necessary evolution towards increased competition and the use of advanced strategies (including
travel and international experience) in the development of a successful athlete. The chapter does deal with some of the research that shows that mental skills can be learned through practice and training, although the causal link between such improvement and benefits to performance remains associative. The chapter also explores the way in which mental skills training can reduce rehabilitation time and increase tolerance to physical discomfort. Interestingly, the author also discusses the extent to which mental skills in sport can be transferred to other aspects of a daily life and whether exposure to challenging environments in the real world can nurture the mental skill qualities that characterize mental toughness.

The book concludes by raising the possibility of cultural differences in the mental toughness of sport performers using Germany and Australia as examples from key sport settings. Although this analogy is interesting, it is based rather less on empirical research and attempts to raise the question as much as provide a definitive answer. It does, however, add some weight to the nurture argument that is discussed in other sections of the book. The final chapter also reminds the reader that sport is something to be embraced by many and that the lifelong mission of the sportsperson is to invest in the likelihood of success rather than be obsessed by absolute success as the ultimate end product. The book proposes that the mentally tough athlete is defined by the commitment to absolute self-improvement rather than by the outcome goals that are held in high esteem by some passive observers.

In conclusion, this book is a useful addition to the published work available to students and lecturers in higher education institutes. It manages to interest the reader through reference to contemporary work from high-profile sportspeople and provides a theoretical base that would be of particular interest to consultants and sport psychology practitioners. Although this book does not detail the ways in which mental toughness can be taught or developed by athletes, it provides additional support for the use of mental skills in the preparation of any serious athlete for competition. Reading this book should stimulate the reader to investigate the ways in which mental skills can be taught, learned, and refined now that the case for their importance has been made.

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