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# Wrestling in Iran: Where Old Meets New in Sport Psychology

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In

## Secrets of Asian Sport Psychology

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Tony Morris, and Stephanie Hanrahan



## Introduction



view video:  
*Early Greek  
Wrestling in  
Olympia*

Wrestling is one of the most ancient sports still contested. Its origins date back at least 5000 years to the Sumerian civilization, and it is apparent that wrestling was commonly practiced by the ancient Egyptians, as evidenced by the many paintings of wrestlers at the Beni Hassan burial tombs. Wrestling became something of an art form in ancient Greece, where it was included in the original Olympic Games from 708 B.C. and provided the culmination of the Pentathlon, following the discus, javelin, long jump, and foot race.



*Paintings of Wrestlers at the Beni Hassan Tombs in Egypt*

Wrestling has appeared on the program of every modern Olympic Games since they were established in 1896, with the sole exception of the Olympics of 1900. Olympic wrestling events for women were introduced in 2004.

The Olympic future of wrestling has come under serious threat recently.

In February 2013, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) voted to remove its core sport status, threatening wrestling's continuation in the Olympic Games from 2020 onwards.



*Women's Wrestling: In the Olympic Games for the First Time in 2004*

Following dramatic changes to its global leadership and a revamped competition format for the sport, the IOC announced in September 2013 that wrestling would remain on the Olympic program. From 2014, international wrestling competitions are held in six weight classes, which vary slightly between the two distinct styles of Greco-Roman and Freestyle wrestling. Wrestling and boxing are the only sports that still require participants to have amateur status to participate in the Olympic Games.



view video:  
*Beauty of Iran*



## Wrestling in Iran



view video:  
*Traditional  
wrestling in  
Iran*

Wrestling is traditionally regarded as the national sport of Iran, even though it has been overtaken by football as the country's most popular sport. Wrestling is viewed by many as more than just as a sport, rather as an integral part of Iranian culture. Champion wrestlers are revered as national heroes who are seen as protectors of the poor and role models for society. There are many variations of wrestling in different parts of Iran that are unique to those regions. Indeed, every province in Iran has its own particular style of wrestling. Traditional Iranian forms of wrestling bear close similarities to Olympic Freestyle wrestling.

Iran has a proud record of success in international wrestling. Since the country first participated at the Olympics Games in London in 1948, eight of the 15 Olympic gold medals won by Iran's athletes have come from the sport of wrestling, five in Freestyle events and three in Greco-Roman. Overall, 38 of the 60 Olympic medals won by Iran have been won by its wrestlers. Furthermore, Iran has won a total of 151 World Championship medals, including 56 gold medals, ranking the country among the most successful of all time.

Emamali Habibi became Iran's first Olympic wrestling champion in Melbourne, Australia in 1956 and his achievement was matched one day later by Gholamreza Takhti.

A legendary Iranian hero, Takhti was renowned for his generosity, bravery and commitment to the poor, and is considered to be a supreme role model for young people. Takhti had the nickname of *Jahan Pahlevan* (Persian: جهان پهلوان; literally meaning *The World Champion*) as much for his chivalrous behaviour and sportsmanship as for his sporting achievements.

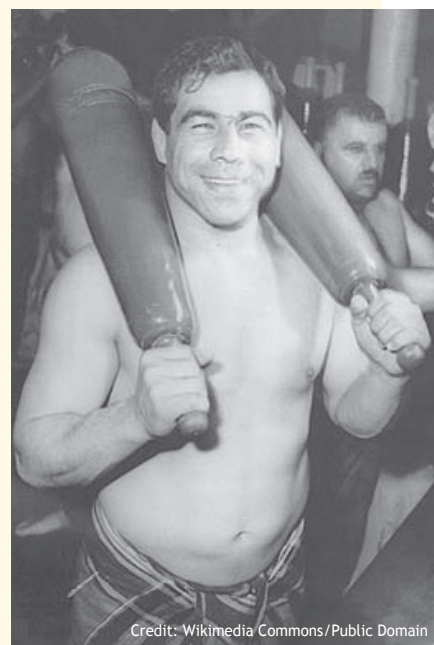
In a celebrated match against Russian adversary Alexander Medved, who fought with an injured right knee, Takhti declined to take advantage, attacking only his opponent's left leg. This made his attacks predictable, which caused him to lose the match but demonstrated that he valued honourable behaviour over victory. Immensely strong physically and mentally, he was a very technical wrestler with several moves unique to him.

Unfortunately he passed away in 1968, taking the secrets of his mental preparation strategies with him. However, many Iranian wrestlers continue to use traditional methods of mental preparation, some of which are detailed in this chapter.



Credit: Courtesy of the Islamic Republic of Iran Wrestling Federation

*Emamali Habibi, Iran's First  
Olympic Wrestling Champion*



Credit: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain

*Jahan Pahlevan Takhti*



Throughout this chapter, whenever the first person form of expression is used, the first author is referring to the applied sport psychology work he has conducted with the Iranian wrestling team over an extended period of time. The second author, who has visited Iran three times to deliver lectures and workshops on sport psychology to national athletes, coaches and support staff, took the lead during the writing and redrafting phases of the chapter. In those instances where details of consulting work completed with specific, named wrestlers are mentioned, the written permission of the athletes in question was obtained.



*Peter Terry at the National Olympic and Paralympic Academy of Iran*

## Working as a Mental Skills Coach

I started work as a mental skills coach at the National Olympic and Paralympic Academy of Iran in 2007 and have been supporting various national teams ever since. Given the largely traditional views held by Iranian wrestling coaches and athletes, and their relative lack of knowledge about

the field of sport psychology, gaining entry into their world presented a difficult challenge. Although I have a background in counselling psychology, I judged that by presenting myself as a mental skills coach rather than as a psychologist would be more readily acceptable to the wrestlers and coaches, and would avoid any perceived stigma associated with use of the term psychologist. My first assignment with the Iranian national wrestling team was to help to prepare the Freestyle wrestlers for the 2007 World Championships in Baku, Azerbaijan, where the Iranian team secured five medals. Subsequently, I supported the Iranian wrestling team at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the 2009 World Cup in Tehran. In addition, I have worked with many wrestlers individually since 2007 in my private clinic.



*Khosro Hamzeh, Sport Psychologist at the 2008 Beijing Olympics*

My own background in sport was as an amateur basketball player but I have always maintained a keen interest in wrestling and followed the major competitions closely. Having a background as an athlete and being knowledgeable about wrestling smoothed my transition into the team and helped me to become accepted by the athletes and coaches. After introducing myself as a mental skills coach to team members, as a first step I always try to explain why mental preparation is important.





Traditional approaches to wrestling in Iran do include some elements of mental preparation but generally athletes and coaches do not share the same worldview nor talk in the same terms as sport psychologists about the mental side of their sport. I have found that a good way to introduce the concept of mental skills training is to talk about the *performance pie* as a way to explain that performance in wrestling, as in any other sport or performance environment, involves the three interdependent elements of technical preparation, physical preparation, and mental preparation (see Figure 1).

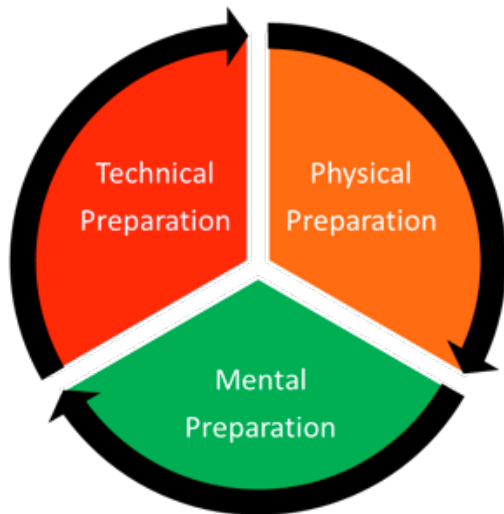


Figure 1. The Performance Pie (adapted from Karageorghis & Terry, 2011, p. 9)

I start by requesting estimates from the athletes about the proportion of wrestling performance that can be attributed to each element of the pie. Their estimates vary of course but approximately equal allocations to the three elements are not uncommon. My next question always relates to how much of their preparation time is devoted to each element of performance. A light bulb moment often occurs at this point when the athletes typically realise that their allocation of time to the three performance elements nowhere near matches their estimates of relative importance. Almost always, mental preparation receives far less time in reality than it warrants according to its perceived importance, and this acts as a hook to gain their interest in my work.

For example, if a wrestler tells me that he completes 20 hours of training per week and he believes that mental preparation represents 25% of wrestling performance, I would ask him if he completes 5 hours per week of mental preparation, as would seem logical. I resist presenting a direct challenge to the wrestlers about the correct portion of mental preparation and always respect their views on the matter, but I do encourage them to work towards a balance between the importance each one attaches to mental preparation and the amount of time they devote to it.

To further motivate the athletes to engage with mental training, I also present them with endorsements from famous Iranian wrestlers, such as Rasoul Khadem (1996 Olympic champion) and international role models, including American John Smith (2-time Olympic champion and 6-time World champion), both of whom were advocates for mental training and included it as an integral part of their wrestling preparation.



Rasoul Khadem (r), 1996 Olympic Champion, Head Coach for the Iran Freestyle Team, Mental Training Advocate, and President of the Iran Wrestling Federation

Credit: John Sachs/flickr/CC-BY-NC-SA-2.0





## Psychological Assessment of Wrestlers

I conduct initial assessments of the athletes using three approaches.

Firstly, I assess each wrestler using a standardised test, usually the Ottawa Mental Skills Assessment Tool (OMSAT-3; Durand-Bush, Salmela, & Green-Demers, 2001), for which there are Iranian athlete-specific tables of normative data. The OMSAT-3 includes scores for 12 mental skills and hence provides both an indication of each wrestler's self-assessed strengths and weaknesses across a range of mental skills, and baseline data against which to assess their development.

Secondly, I use a follow-up, semi-structured interview to probe deeper into the OMSAT-3 results of each individual. Often by exploring the perceived strengths and especially the weaknesses of their existing mental skills, I am able to tailor a more individualised program of mental training. Occasionally, I find that athletes have not understood the OMSAT-3 items properly and therefore their responses would have been misleading without the follow-up interview.

Thirdly, I find that observation of each wrestler during training and competition to be very revealing. I typically spend considerable time observing the wrestlers' performances and the team communication behaviours. Sometimes my observations suggest a completely different pattern of mental skills from the test results. For instance, a Freestyle wrestler preparing for the 2008 Olympic Games had self-reported excellent concentration skills. This self-appraisal contrasted sharply with his observed performance characteristics and reports from team coaches, which both pointed towards poor concentration being his greatest psychological challenge. Whether this was a case of misunderstanding the questions or *faking good* was never quite established, but the situation did confirm the benefit of multiple sources of assessment. Prior to assessments, and particularly where self-reports are concerned, it is important to confirm to all athletes that the results will be used only for the purpose of assisting their preparation and never for the purpose of selection.



Credit: Courtesy of the Islamic Republic of Iran Wrestling Federation

# Mental Skills for Wrestlers

## Imagery

Imagery is the first skill that I teach to athletes because most of them already have some existing imagery ability and, in my experience, tend to appreciate its potential benefits more readily than some other mental skills. Imagery can boost many aspects of wrestling performance, such as modifying technique, enhancing self-confidence, or assisting the refocusing process during a bout.

I start by explaining how imagery works and then introduce simple imagery practices to develop their imagery skills. For example, I may give the wrestlers an orange to scrutinise, touch, smell and taste, and to try to memorise its features. Their next task, with eyes closed, is to visualise the orange and to recreate its features with all their senses.

As a more advanced exercise, I ask them to look at a photograph of a relative or friend, focusing on facial features, hair colour, clothing, and so on. Then, again with eyes closed, they try to visualise all the features of that person in the picture, imagine the person moving around while talking with the athlete. Normally I ask them to complete this practice three or four times a day. When they have mastered this activity it is time to move the imagery exercises into the realm of wrestling competitions.

## vivid and realistic

A common strategy is to ask the wrestlers to imagine competing in the most successful competition of their careers thus far, because most athletes can easily recall this scenario in great detail. I encourage them to recreate that competition in their mind's eye, looking at photographs or videos of the occasion if available, to make their imagery more vivid and realistic.



Credit: Courtesy of the Islamic Republic of Iran Wrestling Federation



## images of success

There are many uses for imagery with wrestlers. For example, if a wrestler is working to improve a technique during training, I would encourage him to augment physical training by using imagery to mentally rehearse the correct technique several times a day. Typically, this helps the wrestler to master the modified technique more rapidly. Imagery is also beneficial to enhance a wrestler's self-confidence by recreating a multisensory experience of a previous successful performance, recalling the sights, sounds, smells, thoughts, and feelings associated with that success. These images can then be transferred to create images of success related to a forthcoming competition. Similarly, a wrestler might use imagery to recall previous successes against an opponent against whom they may be pitted in an upcoming competition to reinforce feelings of ascendancy over that person or, in the case of an opponent over whom they have never tasted victory, imagery may be used to re-edit their previous encounters to create images of success and to mentally rehearse the strategies by which they plan to overcome that particular opponent.

Alireza Heidari is a very successful Iranian wrestler, with five World Championship medals and an Olympic medal. His close rival, Eldar Kortanidze from Georgia, had defeated Heidari in the quarter final of the 2000 Olympic Games and in the final of the World Championship in 2002 and 2003. Heidari regularly used imagery to try to enhance his prospects against Kortanidze. He would close his eyes and imagine himself competing against his arch rival, performing the techniques he believed would give him the best chance of defeating the Georgian. However, once his eyes were open he had trouble recreating these images and he could not picture the referee raising his hand in victory at the end of the contest, which he interpreted as an indication that he did not really believe that he could produce the outcome in reality. Effectively, he was haunted by the memories of his three defeats at the hands of Kortanidze. To prepare for the Olympic Games of 2004, Heidari imagined a successful encounter against Kortanidze more than 100 times, including the referee raising his hand in victory, and slowly but surely his belief grew that he would win. In Athens, Heidari defeated Kortanidze in the first round, recovering from a position of being 2-0 behind to defeat him 3-2 in overtime. By his own testimony, imagery played a key role in helping Heidari to develop the confidence required to overcome Kortanidze.



Credit: Courtesy of the Islamic Republic of Iran Wrestling Federation

Alireza Heidari in action





## Concentration and Refocusing

The capacity to concentrate well, and especially to refocus quickly and effectively, is a very important mental skill for wrestlers. In my experience, this is a common weakness among athletes and hence I always pay particular attention to this issue in my applied work with wrestlers.

I start by explaining that, in any competition, there are particular events that have the potential to interrupt concentration and thereby interfere with performance. Concentration lapses may be caused by internal factors such as irrelevant thoughts or unhelpful emotions, or external factors such as refereeing decisions, crowd reactions, or an opponent's behaviour.

a common  
weakness among  
athletes



There are several ways to address concentration lapses among wrestlers, many of which involve exploring the exact circumstances that caused attention to wander and then suggesting techniques that can assist in regaining focus. For example, I may ask a wrestler to recall situations where concentration was lost and then discuss the reasons why. The genesis of lost concentration often lies in negative or irrelevant thoughts. Once a wrestler has succumbed to thoughts that they cannot beat an opponent or thoughts have drifted away from task-relevant cues, by definition, concentration has been lost.

Hence, one beneficial strategy is to replace a negative thought (*"I cannot win"*) or task-irrelevant thought (*"Am I letting down my country?"*) with a positive, task-relevant thought (*"Attack low and fast"*). Given that the pressure of international competition may sometimes cause an athlete to be overwhelmed with negative thoughts, I encourage every wrestler with whom I work to allocate time to plan refocusing strategies for a variety of scenarios, including those that occur frequently and those that occur rarely but may prove pivotal.



The first part of this process, whereby the wrestler plans replacement thoughts for inappropriate thoughts, is shown in Table 1. After replacement thoughts have been identified, they are written in a notebook, memorised, and mentally rehearsed several times a day, increasingly so as the competition gets closer. The intent is to pre-program appropriate thoughts for scenarios with a demonstrated potential to disrupt concentration, so that effective refocusing becomes a habitual and reliable process. Using imagery to mentally rehearse effective refocusing strategies plays a key role in building habit strength, increasing the probability that the correct response will become the dominant response at critical times in competition.

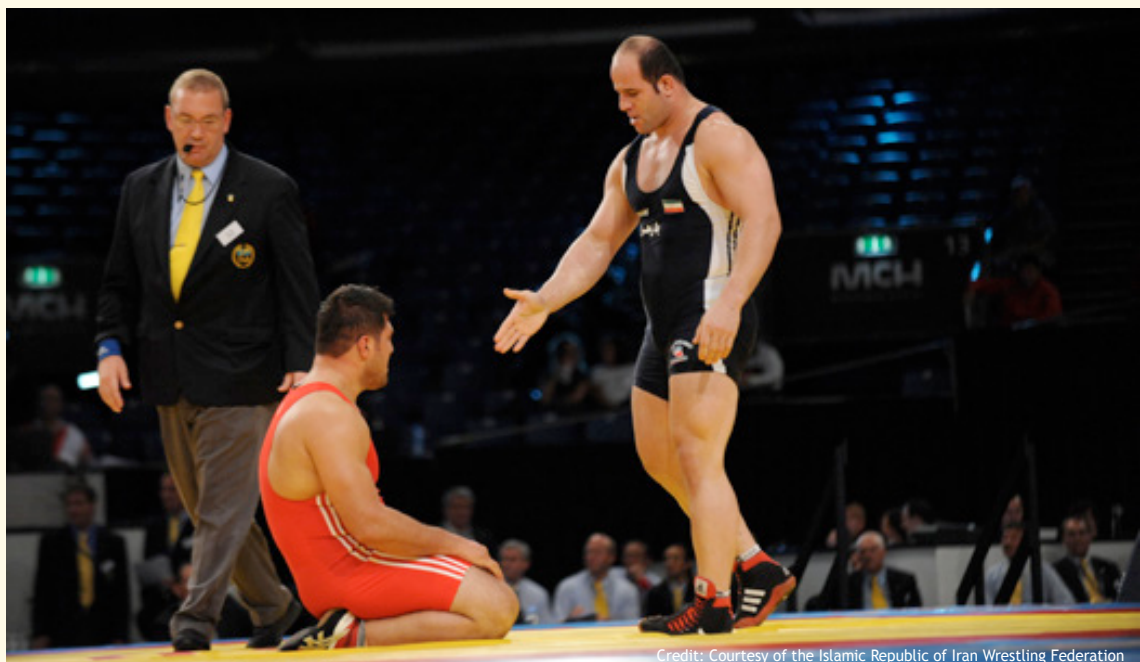
Table 1. Refocusing via Thought Replacement

Distraction scenario	Original thought	Replacement thought
Example: <i>I am behind with 30 seconds remaining</i>	<i>There's no chance of winning</i>	<i>Nothing is finished yet. I only need a few seconds to make the winning move</i>
Scenario:		
Scenario:		

## controlled breathing

Another effective concentration and refocusing strategy that I teach to the wrestlers is the controlled breathing technique, known as *centering* (see Karageorghis & Terry, 2011, pp. 161-162), which they would practice up to 30 times a day. Centering usually forms part of a wrestler's pre-event routine, close to the start of the bout.

Often, I would combine centering with mental rehearsal of key characteristics of their desired performance (specific throws, aggressive approach, planned body language, critical moments) and then try to crystallise these characteristics into simple key words that form the basis of the wrestler's self-talk and act as triggers for pre-planned responses.



Credit: Courtesy of the Islamic Republic of Iran Wrestling Federation



Refocusing techniques proved crucial for Iranian Freestyle wrestler, Mehdi Taghavi, in his preparation for the 2009 World Cup. He identified two specific circumstances that caused his concentration to lapse and made it very difficult for him to refocus attention.

The first scenario occurred when he slipped a point or two behind either of his two main rivals in world wrestling. He found that this situation caused him to focus his attention on the robustness of his opponent's defence rather than searching for weaknesses that he may be able to exploit. In turn this led to negative self-talk ("*He's too good*", "*It's impossible for me to score*") and sometimes he became fixed on this line of thinking until the contest was lost. Based on our discussions, Taghavi came to the conclusion that negative thinking, which led to negative *doing* in the form of defensive tactics, was the primary reason for his defeat. As a result, he committed to developing a more positive approach to refocusing in this scenario using pre-planned positive thoughts, self-talk, and tactics.

The second scenario was when his coach shouted at him during critical moments in his match in an attempt to motivate him. For Taghavi, the shouts of his coach tended to have a distracting rather than motivating effect. In this instance, the approach taken was to reframe perceptions of the situation, interpreting his coach's shouts as genuinely motivational and more likely to disrupt his opponent's concentration than his own. Having reinforced this revised interpretation with positive imagery and self-talk, his coach's exhortations eventually became extremely effective as a motivator when Taghavi found himself behind in a contest. He went on to win the 2009 World Cup gold medal and the World Championships of 2009 and 2011.



Credit: Andrew Dallos/flickr/CC-BY-NC-ND-2.0



## Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is one of the most important psychological characteristics of all. As in all combat sports, it is crucial for wrestlers to have absolute faith in their abilities and in their physical and psychological readiness.



When self-confidence is high a wrestler is often able to overcome an opponent who may be stronger and more skilled. Indeed, a confident wrestler may feel that he is invincible no matter who the opponent. There are many factors that may have a positive impact on the self-confidence of wrestlers, some of which I have addressed below.

## Physical Preparation

In my time with the Iranian national wrestling team I identified a close link, perhaps almost a linear relationship, between the quality, intensity, and thoroughness of the pre-event physical preparation and the level of self-confidence

felt by the athletes. Whenever a wrestler had completed a high-quality program of physical preparation, having fulfilled all their training goals and attended to all the small details of the program, invariably the satisfaction they took from that experience translated into increased self-confidence for the forthcoming competition. By contrast, if a wrestler had experienced a niggling injury or some other minor mishap that resulted in a sub-optimal physical preparation, it tended to eat away at their confidence for the challenge ahead, as though they were going into battle with a piece of armour missing.

As an example, when working with the Freestyle team in preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games, a wrestler who had previously won two World Championship medals and was seen as a realistic chance for the Olympic title, lost precious preparation time at the pre-Olympic training camp due to some pressing personal issues. As a result, he perceived that his preparation had been inadequate and, on several occasions, expressed the view to me and others that he did not feel ready for the Games. Despite my best efforts and those of his coaches, his self-confidence remained low heading into the Olympic competition, where he performed poorly and was eliminated in the second round.

## Positive Self-Talk

Every wrestler engages in self-talk before and during a competition. Positive self-affirmations tend to boost self-confidence whereas negative self-talk tends to detract from self-confidence. I spend time with the wrestlers planning a few positive self-affirmations to reinforce their confidence just prior to or during the critical moments of a contest. Some of the favourite expressions used by the Iranian wrestlers include *“I am in the best condition I have ever been”, “I am so ready to compete”, “No one performs these techniques as well as me”,* or simply *“I am the best.”*



Credit: Courtesy of the Islamic Republic of Iran Wrestling Federation

## Honour Gallery

This is a technique that I have introduced to the wrestlers to support their self-confidence. Each athlete creates a logbook referred to as their *honour gallery*.

To do this, I ask each of them to list the details of their greatest achievements in wrestling on one page of the logbook. For example, they may note down details of winning an Iranian national title or a World Championship medal, giving information such as when and where, plus any other details they regard as important.

On the opposite page, they make a note of the most important rivals that they have defeated and in what circumstances. For example, Olympic bronze medallist Alizera Heidari provided details of defeating his Georgian adversary Eldar Kurtanidze at the 2004 Athens Olympic Games.

Typically, a national team wrestler would provide details of 3 - 6 of his greatest achievements and best wins. The wrestlers use this logbook as part of their pre-event preparation. A few days before an important competition they read through it 2 - 3 times a day, recalling all the positive aspects of those moments, mentally rehearsing the techniques that brought them success, the referee raising their hand in victory, and so on. This helps to establish a foundation of positivity upon which to reinforce confidence about the forthcoming competition.

## Practice Winning

It is common in Iran for coaches to decrease the intensity of training around two weeks prior to an important competition, to provide an opportunity to foster self-confidence among the wrestlers and add the finishing touches to their preparation. During this pre-event period, the coaches always arrange for the national wrestlers to compete in practice bouts against somewhat lower level opponents. The rationale for this strategy is that it provides an opportunity for the wrestlers to practice their competition plans in a relatively low pressure situation and to experience winning on a regular basis. The coaches believe that repeatedly defeating opponents, even those of lower ability, just a few days before a competition is likely to boost self-confidence based on the principle that winning becomes a habit. In addition, the opportunity to successfully execute their competition plans is seen as being of great benefit for their preparation.

## Competition Plans

Developing a competition plan is an important part of the process of helping wrestlers to perform to their full potential. Elite wrestlers develop very fluent actions and techniques that are performed almost automatically. However, to increase the probability of success, it is often necessary to help wrestlers to look beyond their instinctive moves to pre-plan a winning strategy in consultation with their coach. I use two types of competition plans with wrestlers.

### GENERAL COMPETITION PLANS

This type of competition plan is used against an unknown opponent. I find it helpful to segment each 2-minute round into four periods. An example plan might include the following segments.

During the first 30 seconds, the wrestler should be prudent while trying to estimate the ability of an opponent.

In the next 30-second period, he might try to execute pre-planned techniques an agreed number of times, perhaps three attempts in quick succession in order to gain the first point.

In the third 30-second period, there are three possible scenarios depending on the prevailing score. If the wrestler is ahead he should not feel any pressure to attack but instead be alert for a counter attack and try to maintain the status quo until the end of the round. If the score is tied or the wrestler is behind on the scoreboard, he should press his rival by attempting to execute planned techniques a particular number of times to get ahead or draw the round.

In the last 30 seconds of a round, the wrestler must be prepared for the same three scenarios, but should exercise a higher degree of prudence if ahead and greater intensity if challenging for the win.



## SPECIFIC COMPETITION PLANS

There are usually several prominent wrestlers in each weight category who are well known to the other competitors. Wrestlers often spend long periods watching videos of their two or three closest rivals, and usually know their technical characteristics extremely well. Wrestlers may intuitively develop a competition plan to overcome specific opponents but frequently their plans lack adequate detail, emphasizing a few critical moments rather than planning the complete bout. I encourage wrestlers to develop a complete competition plan for every opponent they regard as an important rival.

As with general plans, each round is segmented into four periods but specific plans include greater consideration of how to defend against the *trademark* techniques of specific rivals and which techniques should be used to take advantage of a rival's perceived weaknesses. When developing a competition plan for facing a particularly strong opponent, wrestlers are discouraged from attempting high risk techniques and reminded that a narrow win is all that is required. Competition plans for the three scenarios of being ahead, tied or behind are developed in detail.



Agreed competition plans are written down by the wrestlers in a notebook and read through several times until committed to memory. Competition plans are regularly rehearsed physically and mentally with increasing frequency as competition approaches. When working with a wrestler to develop a competition plan, the mental skills coach must be careful not to encroach upon the coach's territory. The techniques and strategies inherent in the plan are usually based on advice from the Head Coach and, of course, he will have the final say on any competition plan. Given the desirability of wrestlers rehearsing their competition plans multiple times during practice sessions and also during simulated competitions, close collaboration between coach, athlete and mental trainer is essential while the plans are being developed. In practice, once a wrestler has developed an effective general competition plan, that plan can be made specific to particular opponents with only a few modifications.

## Individual Consultations with Wrestlers

Although teaching mental skills to wrestlers is advantageous for their psychological preparation, helping them to feel mentally ready to compete remains an individualised and subtle process. Wrestling's importance in Iranian culture and its popularity among the Iranian public is both a blessing and a curse. On the positive side, the sport is well resourced, the team is well supported, and many of the wrestlers are national heroes. On the negative side though, Iranian wrestling's record of success leads to public expectations reinforced in the media that many medals will be won at every major championship. The burden of expectation can weigh heavily on the shoulders of young men, leading to irrational beliefs about the significance of winning and losing, threatening their self-confidence, and adding tremendously to the self-imposed pressure to perform well.

My approach to addressing such threats to performance is based in the traditions of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT; see Meichenbaum, 2009) and rational emotive behavioural therapy (REBT; Ellis, 2004). Hence, when consulting with the wrestlers individually in preparation for major international championships, and in particular the Olympic Games, I will often explore their fears about the impending competition and then apply therapeutic methods to challenge those fears. Examples of such methods are shown below.

### Downward Arrow Technique

#### FEAR OF LOSING AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES

Losing in the Olympic Games



I would be very sad and upset



I will lose my popularity



I will lose the rewards of success



I will have lost my greatest opportunity

The downward arrow technique involves identifying and pushing assumptions to the limit of their credibility in order to reduce or dispel anxiety. Using this method, I will ask a wrestler to identify a fear they may hold about a competition, write it down, put a downward arrow underneath it and indicate what will happen as a result. This process continues until the wrestler cannot think of any further consequence. This last answer is referred to as the latent hypothesis of the fear and it is seen as the source of the fear. Having found the source of the fear, it is challenged in order to weaken belief in the likely process of events.

For example, Figure 2 shows the train of thought of a wrestler prior to the Olympic Games. His fear of losing at the Games can be traced to the central thought that he will have lost his greatest, perhaps only, opportunity of a medal. On many occasions, not only is the fear a low probability event but something that, with the benefit of a broader perspective, does not represent a catastrophe. In this instance, the wrestler was young and would likely have subsequent opportunities to challenge for an Olympic medal.

Figure 2. Downward arrow technique.

## Questioning

Questioning athletes to gauge their thoughts, feelings, hopes, and fears is an integral part of a counselling psychology approach. For me, questioning athletes is the central method by which I come to understand the athletes' personalities, attitudes, values and motives for participation, but perhaps more importantly to gain insight into their anxieties and sometimes irrational thoughts about forthcoming competitions. By finding ways to decrease competition anxiety, it is sometimes possible to simultaneously improve performance. As a mental skills coach, I regard it as one of my obligations to help athletes cope with the burden of expectation, from themselves or others, and to think rationally about impending competitions.

As an example, I recall a consultation with one of Iran's most popular wrestlers, Saeed Ebrahimi, who was concerned about expectations of him prior to a World Cup event in 2009. Ebrahimi had previously won the silver medal at the 2007 World Championships and a gold medal in the 2005 Asian Championships. My task was to change his thoughts and feelings about what was expected of him in the upcoming competition. An extract of my consultation with Saeed Ebrahimi (SE) is reproduced below.

SE: *If I lose I won't be able to return to my home city.*

Me: *Why do you think that?*

SE: *No one in my city will like or respect me if I lose.*

Me: *I'm not sure I agree; you are their hero.*

SE: *You don't know the people of my city; they only love you when you win.*

Me: *Let me ask you a question, who is Alireza Dabir? (He is the 2000 Olympic champion in the Freestyle 58 kg event, and extremely popular in Iran).*

SE: *Are you kidding me? Everyone knows him.*

Me: *Tell me what comes to your mind first when you think about him?*

SE: *He is an Olympic champion.*

Me: *So the first thing that comes to your mind is his success and not his losses.*

SE: *What do you mean? He made five world championship finals in a row. He is remembered for that and everyone remembers his success.*

Me: *But both of us know that he did not succeed in his last two major competitions, the 2003 World Championships and the 2004 Olympic Games. He was eliminated in the first round both times, don't you remember? When I asked you about him, you recalled his successes and his losses did not come to your mind. The same is true for you. When people think about you, they first remember that you are the World Championship silver medallist and your other victories; the same way that you thought about Alireza Dabir.*



Credit: Ramin Tarasi/Public Domain

Alireza Dabir

Conversations such as this can help to decrease unnecessary worries created by unrealistic expectations or irrational beliefs. In order to guide an athlete through a conversation like this, it is useful to have some knowledge of the history of the sport and the famous champions in your own country and from around the world.



## Traditional Methods of Mental Preparation

It should come as no surprise that Iranian wrestlers have developed traditional methods to prepare mentally for competitions. Developed over many years through experience, such methods have become part of wrestling culture and remain in widespread use today. Some of the traditional mental preparation strategies are described below.



Credit: Courtesy of the Islamic Republic of Iran Wrestling Federation

Masoud Mostafa-Jokar wins Olympic Silver Medal in Athens 2004

### Rival Picture

A common strategy that Iranian wrestlers use to maintain the necessary motivation to train relentlessly at the required intensity is to place a picture of an important rival in a prominent place in their room and every day to stand and stare at the image. This provides a constant reminder that, to defeat this rival, they must train harder and longer than he does. Olympic silver medallist in the 60 kg Freestyle event in Athens 2004, Masoud Mostafa-Jokar, used this method to good effect. To boost his motivation during the pre-Olympic training camp, Mostafa-Jokar used a picture of Russian adversary, Bagavdin Umakhanov. At that time, Mostafa-Jokar thought that Umakhanov would be his fiercest rival for the Olympic title. To help him prepare for training sessions, and especially if he sensed that his training effort was waning, he looked intently at the picture and re-committed to working harder. As events unfolded at the Athens Olympics, Mostafa-Jokar never competed against Umakhanov but his image nevertheless served its purpose of generating optimal preparation, which in turn brought increased self-confidence that culminated in a career-best performance in Athens.



Credit: Courtesy of the Islamic Republic of Iran Wrestling Federation

## Religious Beliefs

Religion is very important in Iranian society and almost all national team wrestlers use religious strategies as part of their mental preparation routines and, in particular, to enhance their self-confidence. Religious activities appear to be among the most popular and most effective mental preparation and pre-competition strategies in the Iranian wrestling community.

The religious activities take many forms. For example, using religious words or phrases as a form of self-talk (sometimes referred to as *God-talk*) prior to performance and/or during critical moments within a bout is reported by the wrestlers to be an effective strategy for helping them to handle the pressure of competition. Many wrestlers say that the feeling of being supported by God makes them feel stronger and increases their hardiness. Some wrestlers use particular prayers that they believe help them to become stronger, and many feel that such prayers should be read by a holy person or one of their relatives with strong religious beliefs.

Another religious strategy used by some wrestlers is to secrete a holy relic on their person going into a match. For example, Fardin Masoumi, multiple World championship medallist in the 120 kg Freestyle event, habitually carried a tiny Quran (Islamic holy book) in his competition clothing during every bout. He reported that he felt much stronger when the Quran was in his clothing during competition.

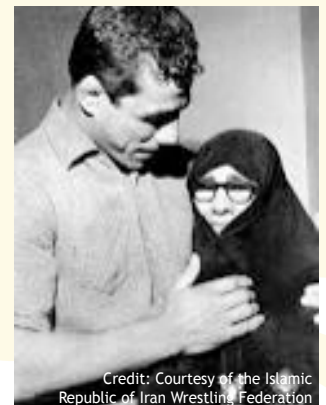


Credit: Courtesy of the Islamic Republic of Iran Wrestling Federation

## Someone Special

Talking with someone special is traditionally seen as a way of helping wrestlers to become calmer before important competitions. Many Iranian wrestlers include a brief talk with a loved one as part of their preparation routine, typically either the night before the competition or just prior to warm up.

As a famous example, one of the country's earliest Olympic champions, Gholamreza Takhti, who is generally regarded as Iran's most popular and influential athlete of the 20th century, always talked with his mother the night before a competition reportedly because she would decrease his worries and leave him feeling calmer.



Gholamreza Takhti with his Mother



## To Think of Winning or to Avoid Losing?

I have been asked many times about the attitudes of wrestlers going into a match. In such a physical, combative sport, are they focused on winning or on trying not to lose? It seems that there is no simple answer to this question. There are champions who use each approach. Most of the wrestlers that I have worked with have told me that they always compete to be a winner irrespective of who they are wrestling against.



Credit: Courtesy of the Islamic Republic of Iran Wrestling Federation

*Morad Mohammadi in action*

Successful wrestlers, such as 6-time World and Olympic medallist Alireza Heidari, 2-time World champion Mehdi Taghavi, and Olympic silver medallist Masoud Mostafa-Jokar, report that they only ever think of winning, but another very successful Iranian wrestler, World champion and Olympic medallist Morad Mohammadi, confirmed that although he thought only of winning when faced with an unknown or lower-ranked opponent, when up against a renowned rival his thoughts turned to the avoidance of losing. Perhaps both approaches can be useful if matched to a wrestler's strategic intent. In my experience, wrestlers who prefer to attack opponents repeatedly tend to focus only on winning, while those who adopt a more defensive, counter-attacking strategy tend to focus on the avoidance of losing.



Credit: Chris Marchant/flickr/CC-BY-2.0



## Success in London

The 2012 Olympic Games in London were a huge success for Iranian wrestling. The team not only won three gold medals in the Greco-Roman events, the first in its history, but also secured one silver and two bronze medals in the Freestyle events. The haul of six medals placed Iran third in the wrestling medal table, just behind Russia and Japan. To gain greater insight into the psychological aspects of this Olympic success, I interviewed each of the three gold medallists plus the head coach of the Iranian Greco-Roman wrestling team. Their interview responses are reproduced here with permission.



view video:  
Iran v  
Azerbaijan  
55kg Greco-  
Roman final

All three Olympic champions spoke about the importance of self-confidence and how they had nurtured their self-belief over many years. Intense physical preparation was seen as a common thread in providing the foundation for their self-confidence.

Hamid Sourian, a 5-time world champion prior to his Olympic success in the 55 kg event, said

*“I spent my whole life preparing for this gold medal. I did the toughest exercises and worked harder than any of my opponents.”*



view video:  
Norouzi v  
Lashki - 60kg  
Greco-Roman  
final

The importance of hard work in the development of self-confidence was also emphasised by the 60 kg gold medallist, Omid Norouzi, who said

*“In London, I always thought I am the best and none of my rivals is even eligible to win gold. I had done so many punishing exercises and so much arduous preparation that no one else was capable of doing as well as me, and that is why I truly believed that I was the best prepared person to win the gold medal.”*



Credit: Mostafa Azizi / Public Domain  
Hamid Sourian

The third member of the champion trio, 96 kg gold medal winner, Ghasem Rezaei, concurred that effort in training was at the core of his self-confidence,

*“The most important thing that contributed to my success was the self-belief gained by completing intense physical preparation via endless high-pressure exercises.”*



Credit: Ben Fitzgerald-O'Connor / flickr / CC-BY-2.0



Credit: Courtesy of Khosro Hamzeh

Mr. Mohammad Bana, Head Coach of the Iranian Greco-Roman Wrestling Team

The unanimous endorsement by the Olympic champions of a link between intense training and self-confidence was a clear reflection of the ethos of Mr. Mohammad Bana, the Head Coach of the Iranian national wrestling team. Coach Bana is widely credited as the architect of Iran's steady rise over the past several years to reach almost the pinnacle of Greco-Roman wrestling globally. He views the journey as a step-by-step development of self-confidence among the team built on incremental improvements in individual performances. In his words, *"the most important thing that helped us to achieve this Olympic success is self-belief that we have built over recent years, to the point where we believe we are the best and can defeat anybody."* He likened the progress of the Iranian wrestling team to an elevator that started its upward journey in 2005 and reached the top floor at the 2012 Olympic Games.

Another common theme among the Iranian wrestling champions was the use of imagery for a variety of separate purposes. Hamid Sourian spoke about using imagery in three distinct ways. Firstly, he commented on how he generated beautiful images in his mind to make himself feel calmer, for decreasing the perceived pressure to perform, and to establish a generally positive mindset (cf. *relaxing place* technique, Karageorghis & Terry, 2011, pp. 111-112).

Secondly, Sourian used imagery to enhance his belief in a successful outcome at the 2012 Olympic Games. He recalled that *"More than 1,000 times, I saw myself standing on the top platform of the podium in London, when I was visualizing myself performing there."*

Thirdly, he used imagery to mentally rehearse his bouts, to predict various situations that might occur against specific opponents and how he would deal with them, to rehearse coping with a range of "what if" scenarios (cf. Karageorghis & Terry, 2011, pp. 182-183), and perhaps most importantly, to rehearse competing successfully in the gold medal match. He credits this type of imagery use with making the Olympic competition feel much more familiar and controllable, and with generating a sense that he already knew how to deal successfully with whatever challenges the competition and particular opponents might present to him.



Credit: Justin Green/flickr/CC-BY-NC-SA-2.0



view video:  
*Rezaei takes  
Wrestling gold  
for Iran*

Ghasem Rezaei also commented on the benefits of imagery for mentally rehearsing his Olympic bouts, although he emphasised how he kept his focus on performance processes rather than the outcome. In his words,

*“Refusing to think about winning or losing was very beneficial for me. In London, before every match I just focused on what I had to do in defence and attack, and never thought about the result. The night before the competition I just pictured all the difficult moments that it is possible to face during a match and imagined myself dealing successfully with them and overcoming the challenge.”*

The night before competition is a special time for Olympic athletes. Many find themselves lying awake unable to sleep, endlessly rehearsing the next day’s action. This can leave them feeling emotionally drained the next morning with a sense of being ill-prepared for the battle ahead.

Omid Nourozi avoided such a scenario by using a different strategy. He deliberately kept his focus away from competition issues in the pre-event period, safe in the knowledge that he was well-prepared for whatever the competition threw at him by virtue of his thorough preparation for the Games.

*“The night before competition in London, I deliberately did not think about what the competition would hold for me the next day. I just tried to eat well and sleep cool. Even on the morning of competition day I continued this strategy by focusing on eating well and completing a very good warm-up.”*

Hamid Sourian noted that he attempted to use a similar strategy on the eve of competition, by refusing to allow competition-related thoughts to dominate. Instead, whenever he cast his mind forward to the next day, he focused solely on his first round opponent and mentally rehearsed what he had to do in that match.



view video:  
*Iran v Russia  
2014 Freestyle  
Wrestling  
World Cup final*

Iran has built upon its success at London 2012 to win several major titles in the past two years, including eight medals at the 2013 World Championships and victory over bitter rivals Russia to win the 2014 Freestyle World Cup.



Credit: Ben Fitzgerald-O'Connor/flickr/CC-BY-2.0



## Summary

In this chapter, we have discussed the use of sport psychology approaches among wrestlers in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In doing so, we hoped to demystify both the country and the sport, and to explain how old meets new in terms of mental preparation for wrestling. We started by explaining the integral place of wrestling in Iranian culture, outlined the country's proud record



of success in the sport, and provided pointers for gaining access as a mental skills coach into a traditional sport such as wrestling. We then gave examples of how specific mental skills, notably imagery, concentration, refocusing, self-confidence, and competition plans, were developed among elite Iranian wrestlers using contemporary sport psychology techniques with reference to traditional methods of mental preparation, and also offered insights into the counselling techniques used with individuals. Finally, we reported on the views of Iran's Olympic champion wrestlers and coach from London 2012, who unanimously endorsed the importance of building self-belief and self-confidence on a solid foundation of intense physical preparation. They also provided strong support for the benefits of imagery and attentional control strategies in the build-up to their successful

Olympic campaigns. We hope that this glimpse into the world of Iranian wrestling offers insights of value to readers, whether they are athletes, coaches, students, teachers, practitioners, or those with just a passing interest in the subject.

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