

Lessons From Super Bowl XLIII

Hello Friends,

I've just returned from Tampa, Florida and the Super Bowl festivities. (No, I didn't have a game ticket but it was great to be in the excitement over the weekend). In what may have been the greatest Super Bowl ever played, mental toughness was on display as the Steelers and Cardinals battled back and forth to an exciting end.

How did they perform so well under pressure? Let's look at the examples below:

Preparation

Success starts before the season begins as players prepare their body and mind for the rigors of the season. Championships are won in practice, every day, as athletes give 100% effort and demonstrate commitment to their sport both on and off the field (for example, film study, extra drills, adequate rest, good nutrition, etc.). **Athletes increase their confidence and focus by adopting a mentally tough mindset and *practicing* it frequently.**

For example, Steelers wide receiver (and MVP from Super Bowl XL) said that the team listened to Phil Collins "In The Air Tonight" the night before the game. "It put the players in a 'meditative state,' and that he imagined himself on the field, making plays." (Florio, February 3, 2009)

Concentration

In such a close game (Steelers won 27-23 on a late touchdown with only 35 seconds left), discipline may have played a role in the outcome. Pittsburgh had 7 penalties for 56 yards, but Arizona gave up almost twice as much yardage (11 penalties for 106 yards). Arizona appeared to have lost some concentration after the interception before half-time as 3 of those penalties occurred on the first Steelers drive of the 3rd Quarter. The penalties kept a 16 play, 79-yard drive alive which resulted in a field goal for Pittsburgh.

Penalties can happen for many reasons, but it takes tremendous concentration to execute solid technique when under pressure. A distracting crowd and opponents drawing your attention to the irrelevant (like trash talking, distracting movements, etc.) make it even harder to execute. **Pre-performance routines establish consistent physical and mental steps to take to be sure your focus is on the most critical aspects of your job.**

Overcoming Adversity

Kurt Warner threw an interception just before halftime which was returned 100 yards for a touchdown (a Super Bowl record). Instead of tying the game at 10-10 or going ahead 14-10, the Cardinals went into the locker room down 17-7. By the 4th Quarter, the Cardinals were down 20-7 against a Steelers team that was an amazing 141-1-1 when winning by more than 11 points in the 4th. For many athletes, negativity and doubt creep in at this time. But Warner and the Cardinals demonstrated mental toughness by staying focused, confident, determined, and in-control emotionally to put points on the board. What at first seemed to be the game winning drive, Warner hit Larry Fitzgerald for a 64 yard touchdown pass with only 2:37 left in the game to take the lead, 23-20. But the Steelers had that same mental toughness, as Coach Mike Tomlin said, "We play for 60 minutes." **The Steelers focused on one play at a time (the key for ultimate focus and performance)** to march 78 yards downfield for the winning score.

Confidence

"Great players step up in big-time games to make plays,' said Holmes, the game's MVP. He said he told Roethlisberger that he 'wanted to be the guy to make the plays for this team.'" (Associated Press, February 2, 2009) When the game was on the line, Santonio Holmes wanted the ball and wanted to make the play. Big Ben found him in the corner of the endzone for a 6 yard TD pass with 35 seconds left.

Such confidence is a critical component of mental toughness. **In soccer, for example, 49 professional players with international playing experience from the UK believed that by far the most important attribute of mental toughness was "having total self-belief at all times you will achieve success."** A secondary characteristic was "wanting the ball at all times (when playing well and not so well)".

Nothing is better to build confidence than preparation ... the first topic in this list.

References

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