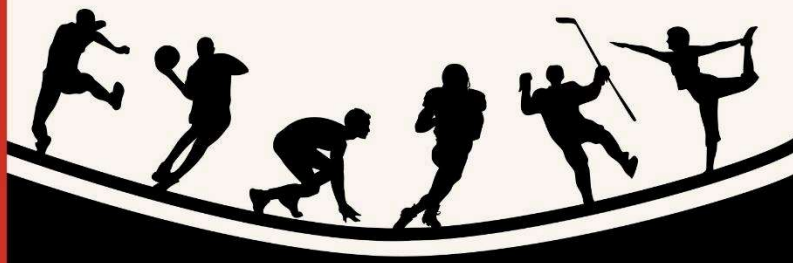


MENTAL FITNESS

FOR

ATHLETES

MASTER YOUR MINDSET
PERFORM YOUR BEST



STEVE WIZE, LCSW

What It Means to be an Elite Athlete

Just how tough are elite athletes?

We've all heard the stories about the toughness of elite athletes, from **Kerri Strug** landing a vault in the Olympics on a broken ankle to win gold for the U.S. women's gymnastics team, to **Tiger Woods** winning the 2008 U.S. Open while playing through a torn ACL, to quarterback **Byron Leftwich** being carried down the field by his teammates to be able to remain in the game while playing for Marshall college, elite athletes are notoriously tough, both physically and mentally.

While there is a difference between playing through injury and just playing "hurt," in contact sports, physical pain and discomfort are inevitable. Beyond just playing through pain during the games, professional athletes have mastered the discomfort of waking up early, not losing enthusiasm after failures, healing from injury, playing under pressure, and doing so day in and day out, year after year, at the highest levels imaginable, all while overcoming microscopically small odds to be able to do so.

This begs the question, how is it that elite athletes push themselves to step in front of 100 mph slap shots, reset their own broken noses midgame without missing a beat, or sacrifice their own bodies diving on the hardwood for rebounds?

The answer is that all these athletes in these examples are playing for a purpose that is bigger than just their individual stat line. They're doing it for their team's glory, to bring the championship to their home city, or to build exposure and support for the sport itself. To do this, they've also trained their brains to override their bodies to get up early for workouts, resist eating junk food, and push through discomfort.

So should everyone strive to be a professional athlete? Would the character one gains from attempting to do so be worth it?

Here's the secret: It doesn't matter if you're a professional athlete or not. The same characteristics of creativity, dedication, toughness, discipline are prerequisites for greatness no matter what your cause—it just takes training to get there!

Qualifying for the Boston Marathon

With each painful, agonizing stride, I said only one word over and over...

“Boston. Boston. Boston.”

This is, quite literally, the only word that ran through my head for the last 3.2 miles of the Columbus Marathon. The year was 2008, and I was 21 years old. It was my senior year in college at Penn State, and I had just cruised through the first 23 miles of the Columbus Marathon and was on the verge of qualifying for Boston.

At mile 23, I was feeling confident and positive. I had a smile on my face and a song in my heart. I was truly in the zone.

Little did I know what was coming for the next three miles...

Despite putting in a significant amount of training, it was only my second-ever marathon that day. Two years earlier, I had run my first-ever marathon, also in Columbus, Ohio. My finishing time for that race was three hours and 24 minutes, putting me about 14 minutes shy of qualifying for Boston. However, like most people running their first marathon, my goal then was simply to finish, which is a life accomplishment in and of itself.

A marathon is no joke. To put the distance of 26.2 miles in perspective, it's the equivalent of 105 laps around a track, running across the Golden Gate Bridge end to end 15 times, or—rather than shooting for 10,000 steps in a day—taking about 59,000 steps in one day instead!

Now, however, coming into this same race two years later, I knew I wanted to improve. Still, Boston was a long shot. Only about 10% of marathon finishers qualify for Boston, so the margin for error is razor thin.

Not only that, it's incredibly hard to knock off 14 minutes from your time. It equates to dropping your mile time by more than 30 seconds per mile. However, halfway through the race that beautiful October morning, I was running at a pace of about 7 minutes per mile, and I noticed that my half-marathon split time was 1 hour 29 minutes. I saw my dad in the audience cheering me on at that point, and I knew that the long shot of qualifying for Boston was a real possibility.

I stayed in that flow state for about the next 10 miles. I was focused. My stride was smooth. The fans cheered us on. My outlook was positive.

Then it hit me.

The moment most distance runners know and dread more than anything... **The Wall.**

The Wall

I had never really hit The Wall before, but I had heard other runners talk about it. In the moment, though, I knew that's exactly what it was.

I remember it vividly to this day. I was running alongside Ohio State University, and marching bands were proudly playing their school pep music. Being from Penn State, I tried to use this to motivate me even more.

But in that moment, almost precisely 23 miles into the race, my body decided to completely tighten up. My hamstrings locked up, and my stride shortened. Everything in my body screamed for me to stop.

They say the last 6 miles of a marathon feel as long as the first 20. For me, though, it was the last 3 miles of the marathon. These next three miles were undoubtedly the longest and hardest I've ever run in my life.

I had been running seven-minute miles on repeat like clockwork, so I knew if I could keep up the pace, I would meet the qualifying time. Unfortunately, there was no way my body was going to let me sustain that pace. Still, I had some wiggle room.

The math was simple. Back in 2008, the qualifying time for Boston for my age group was 3 hours and 10 minutes. This gave me about 30 minutes left to complete the remaining 3.2 miles and still qualify for Boston. On the surface, this may sound fairly easy, and if I hadn't just run 23 miles, this would typically be a breeze, but with my body in full shutdown mode, I knew I was in for a battle with every remaining stride.

There are about 1,500 steps that one takes to complete a mile when running. With 3.2 miles left, I estimate that I said "Boston" about 4,500 times in my head for each one of those remaining 4,500 steps.

Though I've never been in more physical pain in my life, I was locked in mentally.

Despite the fact that my stride was now shorter and my cadence slower, I just kept putting one foot in front of the other. Each step was truly agonizing, but I was determined.

And though I didn't consciously let my mind drift off the goal of Boston, I felt the spirit of all those who believed in me and were rooting for me as the wind at my back—people like my parents, my grandparents, and my close friends back at school.

Despite it being one of the most physically grueling, brutal experiences of my life, I crossed the finish line in 3 hours, 4 minutes, and 57 seconds. I had qualified for Boston

by just over five minutes and had dropped nearly 20 minutes from my first marathon time.

I hugged my dad at the finish line, knowing that this would be a moment that I would forever cherish.



Now, almost 20 years later, I don't run marathons competitively anymore. Rather, now I wear the hats of being an entrepreneur, an author, a coach, a speaker, a husband, and a father. I still run from time to time, but I don't keep score like I used to. I measure my time against other big goals in my life. I run primarily now simply to feel good, not to try to get my best PR (Personal Record).

Nevertheless, I will never forget that moment in time. As any marathon runner can relate, to this day, it remains one of my proudest accomplishments. There's just nothing like the raw, genuine emotional release and sense of pride one has when they achieve a once-in-a-lifetime goal.

A year and a half after qualifying, I ended up running and completing the Boston Marathon. To have over 500,000 people lining the streets and cheering you on is an incredible experience. And though I'm glad to have run and completed Boston, it's actually the qualifying race in Columbus that was the most meaningful to me.

For me, running or being an athlete isn't so much about the accomplishments or even physical fitness. It's about developing your Mental Fitness. Indeed, it wasn't physical fitness that got me through those last 3 miles. It was my Mental Fitness that carried me through the finish line.

And that's what this book is all about: how you, too, can develop your Mental Fitness—not just to accomplish physical goals, but to accomplish your life goals as well.

My name is Steve Wize, and I am the author of this book.

Thanks for being a part of this journey together!

Mental Fitness for Athletes

In sports, we hear coaches say that “the game is 90 percent mental,” and yet, ironically, 100 percent of practice time is dedicated to developing an athlete’s physical abilities.

Unfortunately, this exclusively physical, overly traditional approach neglects the core aspect of what it is to become an elite athlete: *Mental Fitness*.

Intuitively, we all know this. We perform at our best when our attitude and enthusiasm are strong, and conversely, our performance suffers when our confidence and passion are weak.

Ask any elite athlete what sets them apart from other average or even high-level athletes, and it’s not their physical training regimen that they talk about—it’s their mindset!

This begs the question, then: If mindset is so important, why aren’t we teaching it to our athletes?

For many coaches, it’s not a matter of coaches not wanting to talk about mindset, but rather, it’s a matter of not knowing how to guide, motivate, or help someone navigate a better mindset for the game. Having just the right inspirational story to share, or having the textbook knowledge of a sports psychologist, isn’t something most coaches are trained to know.

Even for us avid sports fans and coaches, we must admit that the ability to get inside an athlete’s head and to know how to help them perform better is beyond us.

In addition, for most individual athletes, we’re never taught any specific mental strategies to build resilience, grit, or self-confidence.

This gap—of not having a vast knowledge of inspirational stories to motivate ourselves or others, plus the lack of positive self-talk and mental strategies to help improve one’s individual athletic mindset—is what this book aims to bridge.

The ultimate goal of this book is to provide athletes and coaches with strategies to condition their minds just like we would condition any other muscle in our bodies.

It is beyond time that we stop just talking about the importance of mindset, and instead, we get to work!

About the Author

Steve Wize, LCSW

My name is Steve Wize, and in addition to being an amateur endurance athlete, I'm also a licensed clinical social worker and the president, founder, and creator of Mental Fitness, LLC. Throughout my career, I've also been certified as a NASM (National Academy of Sports Medicine) certified personal trainer and nutrition coach. I truly believe not just in helping people think better, but to eat better and exercise better as well. Indeed, you can't optimally do one without simultaneously working on the others.

As your narrator, it's important that you know who I am and how this book came to be.

For many years in my late teens and throughout my 20s, I trained to be a high-level amateur endurance athlete. I ran in the Boston Marathon, completed an Ironman in Hawaii, and rode my bike 335 miles from Pittsburgh to Washington, DC. I did this all while also working full-time as a professional therapist, helping people improve their mental health.

This unique dichotomy of working in mental health while also dedicating an almost equal amount of time to my physical skills put me in a unique position to see the synergistic crossover that came from blending both worlds.

Working as a therapist by day, I often used physical fitness analogies to show people how they could condition their mental health in much the same way.

Then, after several years of working in the field, in March of 2016, it hit me...

Mental Health + Physical Fitness = Mental Fitness.

With this epiphany, I fell upon a new and deeper calling. By helping my clients improve their mental conditioning, they were seeing great results. It was here, with their encouragement fueling me, that I knew I was on to something big. It was around this time that I started writing the original book, *Mental Fitness*, so that its message could be shared with the world.

In addition to the book, in October of 2017, I started Mental Fitness as my own professional counseling and speaking business. In November of 2019, after about three and a half years of research and creation, I finished the original *Mental Fitness*

Workbook: A 12-Week Guide to Become Mentally Fit. In it, I aim to help people master their thinking so they can master their lives.

From there, the book was also transformed into a course curriculum that is now being used in partnership with the University of Pittsburgh to train therapists across the nation, being studied by Penn State University for scientific efficacy, and used by Erie McDowell High School as part of their high school curriculum.

*I truly believe if we teach physical fitness in all schools across the county,
we should be teaching Mental Fitness as well!*

What It Means to be an “Athlete”

Throughout this book, we’ll be addressing our reading audience as “athletes,” but what does it really mean to be an athlete?

A simple definition of an athlete is someone who competes in sports involving physical strength, speed, power, or endurance, but quite frankly, I don’t love that as a definition for whom we’re speaking to here.

Mark Cuban, a famous businessman and television personality, has a book called *How to Win at the Sport of Business*. In it, he uses the analogy of an athlete’s competitive mindset and applies it to how someone can use the same strategies for business.

In this way, our book is similar. For us, an “athlete” is anyone who wants to improve their mindset using the principles derived from competitive sports to achieve a large goal.

For example, for me, completing an Ironman 70.3 in Hawaii didn’t win me anything substantial. Instead, however, it gave me the confidence to know that if I could train for and complete an Ironman, perhaps I could be successful in starting my own business as well. And perhaps if I was strong enough to endure an Ironman, that confidence could carry over to embracing the challenges of marriage and fatherhood, becoming an entrepreneur and author, etc.

An “athlete,” then, for us, isn’t just someone who competes in sports. It’s someone who recognizes the value of gaining character through competition, adversity, and winning and losing.

Our goal isn’t just to help you become a better athlete in sports, but rather, to help you become a better “life athlete.” The goal of this book is to give you the strategies, skills, and mindset to thrive in all of the areas of your life that are meaningful to you.

What is “Mindset”

Mindset is the effort and attitude you bring to a challenging endeavor. In life, we can't always control the outcomes we face, but we can control how we choose to respond to them.

In fact, *the only thing you can 100 percent control in your life is your attitude!*

Understanding this concept is immensely powerful, and the athletes who get it are the ones who thrive. On the other hand, for athletes whose emotions and mindset are dependent on winning or losing, they often get swept up in the game itself and lose all internal control and inner power.

Here's an example from baseball:

Believe it or not, the result of any one baseball game is far more determined by luck than by skill. Indeed, according to the book *Moneyball*, a statistician calculated that in any given Major League Baseball game, there is a one-run difference due to skill and a four-run difference due to luck.

To put that into perspective, winning or losing one game—or even winning or losing one series of seven games—can be more attributed to luck than talent. But if this is the case, why are the Yankees and Dodgers consistently at the top by the end of the season, whereas the Pirates and A's are consistently at the bottom?

What happens is that over the course of a season, luck balances out, and the significance of skill prevails. When you play 162 baseball games a year, the sample size is large enough for the strength of skill to show itself. In any one game, however, basically anything can happen.

Here's why this matters and how it relates to mindset:

If you get down on yourself because of any one loss, or even any one lost series, you end up losing sight of the forest for the trees. In most sports, anyone can win one game, but hard work and skill tend to win in the long run.

Like how talent shows itself over the full course of a season, mindset is very much the same. **Tom Brady** didn't win every Super Bowl over his 23-year career, but he did win seven. **Michael Jordan** didn't win every NBA Championship over his career, but he did win six.

The point is that elite athletes don't always win, but they do trust that having an athletic mindset will tip the odds in their favor in the long run.

What You'll Gain from this Book

In today's world of sports, the competition at elite levels has never been higher. The goal of getting a college scholarship, or even making a high school team, takes more time, dedication, and personal investment than ever before. This book will help athletes who aspire to achieve those goals get the mental edge necessary to make those dreams a reality.

In addition, not everyone is going to become a professional athlete, and that's okay. The goal of sports is bigger than just performing physically at one's best. The broader goal of sports is to teach character and inspire individuals to realize their true potential.

Teamwork, self-discipline, belief in oneself... these aren't just lessons that apply to athletics; they apply to life.

By reading and learning the principles and stories within this book, you'll gain greater mental resilience, inspiration, and confidence. These are the characteristics that will make you not only successful in sports, but that will also stick with you throughout your life, bringing out both the best in yourself and those around you.

The Structure of this Book

To structure this book, we're going to simultaneously present the experiences of various athletes along with Mental Fitness concepts and inspirational stories from across the world of sports. The aim is to combine all of these aspects into a comprehensive guide for athletes to improve their mental fitness.

To make the book more inclusive, however, we will also be including stories from football, baseball, basketball, the Olympics, swimming, and just about every other sport you can imagine!

The book is broken down into six main parts.

Part 1 is about Childhood Dreams. Here, we'll look at how kids fall in love with the game, the role of parents, sports idols, and learning the fundamentals. We'll also discuss building friendships, trusting the process, and dreaming big.

Part 2 is about Mastering Mindset.

Part 3 is about the Professional Level.

Part 4 is about Temptations and Escapes.

Part 5 is about Overcoming Adversity.

Part 6 is about Paying It Forward.

Through these six parts, we aim to cover all the components of a mentally fit athletic mindset. Whether you're a coach, a kid, a parent, or a professional, we hope the stories, lessons, and topics we cover will inspire and challenge you.

I thank you for taking the time to read my book. I hope you use it for your own personal development and share the message with others.

Enjoy!

Part 1: Childhood Dreams

The Love of the Game

Play for Her

Sports Idols

The Role of Parents

Actions Speak Louder than Words

The Losada Line

Never Punish Progress

Team Building and Bonding

The Fundamentals

Having Fun, Building Friendships

Respect and Trust the Process

Learning the Game

Teaching Grit to Kids

Tipping the Scales

Dream Big

3 Steps to Visualization

Part 2: Mastering Mindset

Going All-In

Talent Isn't Real

Failure as Fuel

How to Break Out of a Slump

The 20/60/20 Rule

The Most Important 6 Inches is In-Between Your Ears

Your Real Enemies

Million Dollar Ankles

Holding Grudges

Stress: Negative Threat or Positive Challenge

How to be a Great Fan of the Game

Stop Sitting on the Sidelines of Your Life

Dreamer, Doer, Doubter, Hater

Your Mind is a Muscle

Part 3: Professional Level

Leveling Up

Wake Up Every Day like You've Got Something to Prove

The Mundanity of Excellence

Fight the Biggest Guy (And Lose)

Professional Level Grit

Fighting for Every Inch

Don't Let the Haters Rent Space in Your Head

Separate Each Day and Each Play

Keep Your Head Where Your Feet Are At

Lessons from High School Football

Finding Your Role: Glue Guys and Role Players

Unsung Heroes

Why "Super Teams" Fail

A Balanced, Team-First Approach

Sports IQ: The Game Within the Game

Stress, Scarcity, Farmers and Flow States

Two Types of Flow

Achieving Your Best at 80% Success

Thinking Differently, Changing the Game Forever

Confidence and Mental Preparation

Leaders Call Up, Not Just Call Out

Part 3: Professional Level (continued)

The 2008 Winter Classic

The 2010 Olympic Games

The Rematch and The Golden Goal

Substance Abuse in Sports

Part 4: Second Chances

Getting in Great Shape

The 10 Principles of Goal Setting

We Get What We Tolerate

2018 Olympic Tryouts

Next Steps: Saving RMU

The Real Heroes

The Healing Power of Hockey

BDNF: The Science of Healing

Disorder or Injury? PTSD or PTSI

Tristan's Words

Part 5: Paying It Forward

Mental Health Treatment is Broken and Backwards

Removing Stigma

The Mental Edge

Mastering Mental Fitness

10 Tips for Mastering a Mindset of Leadership

Making a Difference

Sports are a Metaphor for Life

Final Words from Steve