

Does Mental Toughness really make a difference to performance?



A review of the correlation between Mental Toughness and sporting performance based on the results of studies published in scientific journals between 2000 and 2020 (www.researchgate.net/publication/358052891_Effect_of_mental_toughness_on_sporting_performance_review_of_studies) produced some interesting results.

The review included sports such as Basketball, Volleyball, Triathlon, Kickboxing, Skiing and Horse-riding. Countries included Malaysia, Australia, USA, Egypt and Jamaica with sample sizes ranging from 16 to nearly 400.

Here are some conclusions:

“The elite sprinters were characterized by greater Mental Toughness than their peers with lower sporting achievements”

“The winners in kickboxing fights were characterized by higher Mental Toughness on all scales”

“Positive correlations were found between Mental Toughness and the effectiveness of throws on the goal, with the strongest correlations documented for total index of Mental Toughness”

“Positive correlations were observed between Mental Toughness

and some indices of performance level during the (tennis) match”

“The players of the national team in soccer had significantly greater Mental Toughness than the players from the first and second league

Here are some more conclusions:

“There was no relationship between Mental Toughness and place in the ranking in technical and speed competitions in alpine skiing”

“There was no significant correlation between the total Mental Toughness index and the basketball level of performance index”

“There were no significant correlations between the selected dimensions of Mental Toughness and performance in equestrianism”

A variety of tools were used in the different studies; the *Psychological Performance Inventory*, the *Mental, Emotional, and Bodily Toughness Inventory*, *MTQ48 & MTQ18*, *Sports Mental Toughness Questionnaire*, *Mental Toughness Inventory*, to name but a few.

Different sports were studied, different questionnaires were used and different results were obtained.

Having said that, the tendency seems to be more towards Mental Toughness having a positive effect on the sports results or performance level.

Professor Peter Clough (a world expert in Mental Toughness) has broadly estimated that all things being equal and in general, 25% of the difference in performance levels between individuals can be explained by their overall level of Mental Toughness.

It seems clear that Mental Toughness provides a “performance

edge”; however, a certain level of performance has to be there in the first place; Mental Toughness doesn’t replace performance skills and competencies – even if I mustered all my available Mental Toughness, I still don’t think I could beat my neighbour’s daughter at tennis – let alone a Nadal or Federer!!

Not all those with high mental Toughness are champions, but all champions have high Mental Toughness.

There was a lot of talk recently about the Mental Toughness of Novak Djokovic and Nick Kyrgios and whether Djokovic won because he had more Mental Toughness than Kyrgios or, did he win simply because he is a more competent tennis player.

Clearly, anyone operating in the upper echelons of any sport will have high or even very high Mental Toughness; you don’t get to that level of performance by chance, by not taking risks, by not being determined or by not learning from your mistakes – all contributing factors to Mental Toughness.

Both Djokovic and Kyrgios have undoubtedly very high “global” Mental Toughness; however, as Mental Toughness is made up from different elements, you can have an “Achilles heel” that can let you down.

Now, I have never measured the Mental Toughness of Djokovic or Kyrgios; however, I would suggest that they both have the same Achilles heel – low (or even very low) Emotional Control. Both have been penalised and thrown out of tournaments for emotional outbursts; cursing, swearing, aiming balls at the umpire, breaking rackets – all signs of low Emotional Control.

I remember Djokovic admitting his emotional control problem after he was thrown out of the US Open and, he said he was being coached on his problem. It seems to me that the coaching is paying off as he seems to be more in control of his emotional energy today.

Kyrgios on the other hand seems to make a drama out of almost every point and, in my opinion, uses up a lot of emotional energy unnecessarily.

So, does Mental Toughness really make a difference to performance?

Well, in the world of the sports, the answer seems to be a fairly resounding yes!

So, what about the rest of us, we don't all play world class tennis or any other sport.

Does Mental Toughness help us in our "day-to-day" performance challenges?

Does it help us to face up to people trying to shout us down?

Does it help us to take the risk of experiencing something new?

Does it help us to stick to our guns and deliver on difficult goals?

Does it help us to make those important life decisions we need to make?

I have an opinion, what do you think?