PREMIER MINDSET INSTITUTE

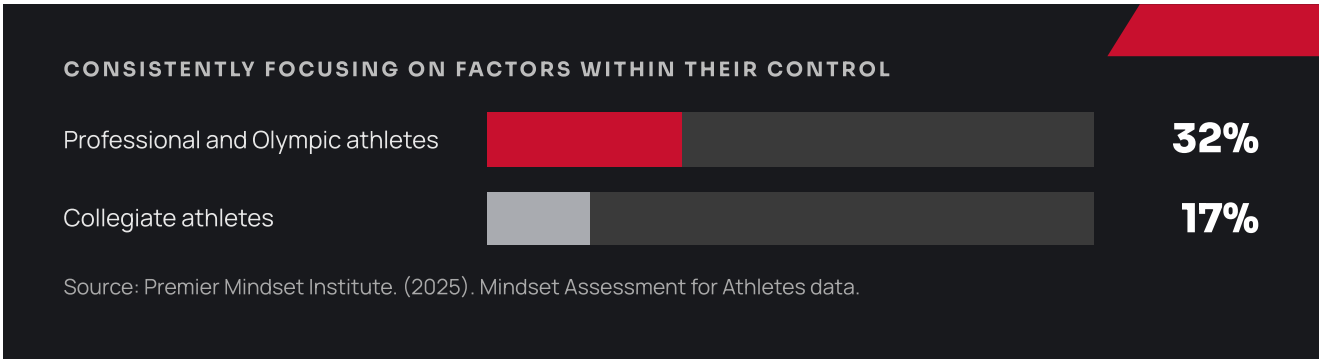
WHITE PAPER

FOCUSING ON THE CONTROLLABLES

What the Data Reveals About Performance Under Pressure

A SURPRISING STATISTIC IN PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY

Recent data from the Premier Mindset Institute (PMI) revealed that only 32% of professional and Olympic athletes and 17% of collegiate athletes report consistently focusing on factors within their control when it matters most.



The remaining majority report that their attention frequently drifts toward uncontrollable variables—such as outcomes, past mistakes, playing time, or others' opinions—patterns that carry measurable cognitive and physiological costs (PMI, 2025).

WHY FOCUSING ON THE CONTROLLABLES MATTERS

Attention is a limited cognitive resource. When directed toward low-yield or uncontrollable targets, it reduces capacity for execution, learning, and recovery (Kahneman, 1973; Wickens, 2008).

Ruminating on past events elevates cortisol and stress physiology—responses linked with fatigue, impaired recovery, and slower or diminished decision-making (Zoccola & Dickerson, 2012). Chronic stress signaling further impairs prefrontal cortex functioning, reducing working memory and emotional control under pressure (Arnsten, 2009).

Conversely, focusing attention on controllable factors—preparation, effort, task cues, and behavioral response—has been associated with greater composure, resilience, and performance consistency (Gardner & Moore, 2007). In short, energy follows focus, and focus profoundly impacts performance.

> **ENERGY FOLLOWS FOCUS, AND FOCUS PROFOUNDLY IMPACTS PERFORMANCE.**

The challenge is not merely knowing what is controllable, but having a structured plan to direct attention toward those controllables when emotional and environmental demands are highest.

CONTROLLABLE

- Attention
- Preparation
- Behaviors
- Effort
- Task cues
- Behavioral response

UNCONTROLLABLE

- Outcomes
- Past mistakes
- The last play
- Playing time
- Future roles
- Others' opinions
- The referee

WHAT SEPARATES THE GREAT FROM THE GOOD

Through years of applied work with professional All-Stars and Olympic gold medalists, one consistent differentiator stands out: elite performers are able to sustain their attention on performance-relevant data (controllables) under pressure, not just when conditions are ideal.

Research identifies locus of control—the belief that one can execute actionable and controllable behaviors ("like attentional direction") that influence outcomes—as a key predictor of confidence and emotional stability. Athletes exhibiting a strong internal locus of control report lower pre-competition anxiety and higher confidence (Amar et al., 2023). This orientation enables them to direct cognitive resources toward controllable performance variables (e.g., attention, preparation, behavior, and effort) rather than external stressors that deplete attentional capacity and cognitive energy.

In performance environments defined by uncertainty—competition, leadership, or high-stakes decision-making—cultivating an internal locus of control is foundational for maintaining performance consistency (Judge & Bono, 2001).

TRAINING ATTENTION WITH A FRAMEWORK

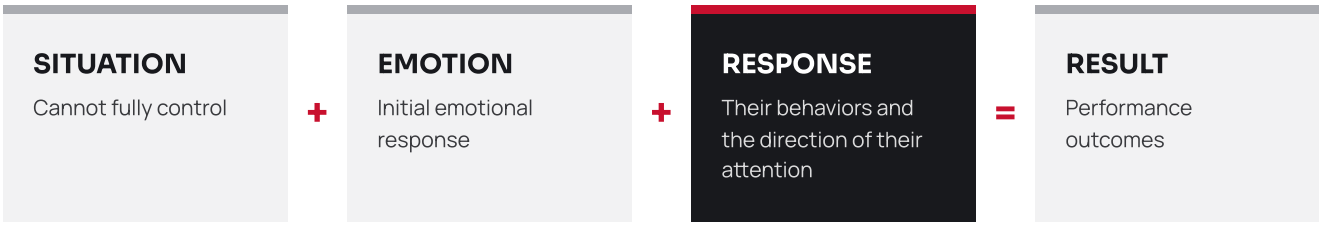
Athletes benefit from structure and repetition in attention training, just as they do in physical conditioning. In military and tactical domains, Stress Inoculation Training (SIT) provides a proven framework that helps individuals learn what to focus on, what to release, and how to recover under stress (Meichenbaum, 1985; Robson & Manacapilli, 2014). The principle is straightforward: plan for stress, practice under controlled pressure, then reflect, debrief, and grade performance to guide future improvements.

01
PLAN FOR STRESS

02
PRACTICE UNDER CONTROLLED PRESSURE

03
REFLECT, DEBRIEF, AND GRADE PERFORMANCE
to guide future improvements

A parallel approach in sport is Premier's SERR Model™—Situation + Emotion + Response = Result—a framework widely used by applied sport-psychology practitioners. The model underscores that while athletes cannot fully control the situation or the initial emotional response that follows, they can meaningfully influence performance outcomes by regulating their response—that is, their behaviors and the direction of their attention.



Premier's SERR Model™

This emphasis on behavioral control aligns with research showing that focusing on actionable responses, rather than attempting to suppress emotion, enhances emotional regulation, attentional stability, and decision-making under pressure (Gross, 2015; Webb et al., 2012). Behavioral-control strategies such as cognitive reappraisal, task cueing, and attentional refocusing have been shown to improve emotion regulation and resilience under load (Gross, 2015; Webb et al., 2012).

For instance, a baseball player who centers attention on controllable responses—breathing cadence, instructional self-talk, or hustling after an error—reestablishes rhythm and focus. Over time, these "response reps" build emotional regulation, attentional recovery, and performance consistency.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The research underscores a consistent truth: while we cannot control the last play, the referee, or our future roles, we can control our attention, preparation, behaviors, and effort.

The most successful athletes don't waste energy on what they can't change—they master what they can. Training this mindset is not abstract; it is measurable, repeatable, and transferable across domains of performance (Meichenbaum, 1985).

FOR ACCESS TO APPLIED TRAINING RESOURCES

- For sport organizations or athletes, visit Premier Sport Psychology
- For Business, visit Premier Performance Advising

REFERENCES

Amar, I. B., Gomni, C., Chortane, O. G., Khmiri, A., Ghouaiel, R., & Baker, J. S. (2023). The relationship between locus of control and pre-competitive anxiety in highly trained soccer players. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*, 1227571.

Arnsten, A. F. T. (2009). Stress signalling pathways that impair prefrontal cortex structure and function. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience, 10*(6), 410–422.

Gardner, F. L., & Moore, Z. E. (2007). *The psychology of enhancing human performance: The mindfulness-acceptance-commitment (MAC) approach.* Springer.

Gross, J. J. (2015). Emotion regulation: Current status and future prospects. *Psychological Inquiry, 26*(1), 1–26.

Judge, T. A., & Bono, J. E. (2001). Relationship of core self-evaluations traits—self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, locus of control, and emotional stability—with job satisfaction and performance: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 86*(1), 80–92.

Kahneman, D. (1973). *Attention and effort.* Prentice-Hall.

Meichenbaum, D. (1985). Stress inoculation training. *New York, 304.*

Premier Mindset Institute. (2025). Mindset Assessment for Athletes data [Data Set]. Premier Sport Psychology.

Robson, S., & Manacapilli, T. (2014). Enhancing performance under stress: Stress inoculation training for battlefield airmen.

Webb, T. L., Miles, E., & Sheeran, P. (2012). Dealing with feeling: A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of strategies derived from the process model of emotion regulation. *Psychological Bulletin, 138*(4), 775–808.

Wickens, C. D. (2008). Multiple resources and mental workload. *Human Factors, 50*(3), 449–455.

Zoccola, P. M., & Dickerson, S. S. (2012). Assessing the relationship between rumination and cortisol: A review. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 73*(1), 1–9.

PREMIER MINDSET INSTITUTE

PMI is the research division of Premier Sport Psychology, dedicated to understanding and improving human performance through science, data, and applied innovation.

premiermindsetinstitute.com