

The Mental Game – Match Fitness

In sport, coaches often talk about being 'match fit'. Practice form doesn't always transfer to the playing field where nerves and the pressure of competition play a part. As an athlete, it doesn't matter how much time you spend on practice, and practice matches, the first 'real' competition of the season is always hard. It is easy to have a nervous flutter at the beginning of the match, or to lose form or focus towards end of the match. In the physical sports, athletes often tire towards the end of the first match of the season, whilst in the mental sports like bridge and chess, it is concentration and focus that suffer. Athletes in all sports and competitions experience this phenomenon of match fitness that shows particularly towards the end of a match, no matter whether it is football, tennis, chess or bridge. The reasons for this are unclear - maybe it is the added tension of 'competition', the higher focus, or other factors - however there is no doubt that true competition is infinitely harder than practice matches.

It is important to be able to remain focussed, and concentrate right through until the last card is played. Just imagine how disappointed you will feel if you play really well for the first 10 boards of a 14 board match, only to find you lose 20 imps in the last 4 boards of the set due to loss of concentration. This is where your match fitness shows.

Athletes address the phenomena of 'match fitness' by participating in overload training, and by playing in some lesser competitions before the main competition of the year. What this meant for me in shooting was that if my match was 60 shots long, I used to regularly practice shooting matches twice as long. With everything else going on in competition, the last thing you need is fatigue contributing to a sub-optimal performance. I once heard a champion athlete say 'your competition day should be the easiest match of the year'.

How does this apply to bridge matches which are multi-match & multi-day events? If we consider that any of our national events are usually multiple 14, 16 or 20 board matches per day, then our practice and preparation for these events needs to prepare us to be able to play at our best right up until the last card of the day. In the same way that I regularly shot more rounds than the length of my match, in preparing for these type of event, playing multiple 30+ board matches in practice sessions will help ensure you are prepared for the rigours of competition.

Overload training on its own is insufficient, and I have also discussed in previous articles the concept of taking a mental break when a bad board occurs, or when one of the partnership has a failure at the table that may cause them to lose concentration. The same tactics may also be used to provide a mental break in the latter part of the match. A toilet break at board 10 of a 14 or 16 board match might not be physically necessary for a player, but it can provide the time for a little mental rest allowing you to avoid lapses in the vital last few boards.

Finally, knowing your preparation has made you match fit going into a competition can give you a confidence boost, and the benefit of this in a close match can be the difference between success and defeat.

