

*THE*

# ANXIOUS ATHLETE

*SOLUTION*

A 14 Day Countdown-to-Competition Guide



BEN WISE  
ZOAR

# FOREWORD

**"As you listen to that voice in your head, that voice becomes your best or your worst coach. Nobody will coach you more than that voice." -Ben Bergeron**

The voice in my head taunts me. It asked, "Have you done enough?" It whispers, "Do you have what it takes?" It jeers, "You've worked too hard to come up short again." I try to shut the voice up. Truthfully, training is the one thing that keeps it at bay. In many ways, it is how I cope. Training gets me through the tough times in my life. It is like an old friend who is always there, always the same, always someone I can count on. Competing is supposed to be exciting. I see the joy it brings to other athletes. Yet, I never enjoy it. If I'm honest, I fear it. It uncages the voices in my head that I've worked so hard to silence. I wish that I could get past the stresses and fears of competing. I wish I had the tools to unlock my full potential. I wish I could overcome my anxiety of competition and rise up to be the champion I know I can be.

That was me. Turns out, that which is most personal is also most universal.

I struggled with performance anxiety during my time as a collegiate wrestler. I wish I could say I overcame my fears, and I was a wonderful success story. I wasn't. I was never able to move past the fears I experienced while I competed, so I could display my true abilities. Unfortunately, that leg of my athletic career was over.

It wasn't until several years later, competing in CrossFit, that I was truly able to overcome that voice in my head. I no longer get anxious to compete. I no longer feel a crippling pressure to perform that prevents me from doing my best. I am more present. I take in the atmosphere; the cheers of the fans, the music on the floor, the other competitors, all of it. I compete at a level higher now than I could ever touch in training. Competing is exciting and empowering.

It wasn't an overnight journey. I had to reshape my identity. I had to read, study and assess. I trained specific skills that allowed me to perform at my best on game day. Mindful breathing, visualization, positive self-talk, relaxation techniques, fear setting and developing a mantra all played a significant role in my journey. These are the same techniques I deliver to you in *The Anxious Athlete Solution* in a way that is practical and most importantly, actionable.

It is my hope for you to overcome your fears and stresses as an anxious athlete and reform your identity as a mentally tough competitor that performs your best when it matters most.

Ben Wise

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# INTRODUCTION

**"The key to success is self-confidence. The key to self-confidence is preparation." -Arthur Ashe**

Congratulations. You've already taken the first step in making your next competition your best yet. By reading this, you're investing in yourself. By reading this, you're attacking your weaknesses. By reading this, you're taking ahold of your life and showing you have control over its outcomes. So again, congratulations. You've completed step one.

Step two is commitment. Holding yourself accountable is the mark of a champion. Commit to reading this guide over the next 14 days. Ideally it will be the 14 days leading up to your big day, a countdown to competition. If you don't have a competition planned, I encourage you to read this guide a second time starting 14 days out from your next competition. If you do know the date of your next competition, temporarily stop reading and put a reminder on your calendar for 14 days prior to your competition date. When the reminder comes up, re-read.

"Knowing what to do and not doing it is the same as not knowing what to do." The final step is application. As an athlete, you must apply what you learn to be the best. Each of the 14 days is going to give you a call to action, a tangible step for you to take that day. You will easily find ways to skip the action step. It's not a matter of if but when. In the moment you are tempted ask yourself, "What does a champion look like?"



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# 14 Days

Until Competition

## TURNING YOUR PERFORMANCE ANXIETY INTO PERFORMANCE EXCITEMENT

Everyone leaves performance on the table. No one has ever left a competition and truly done *everything* possible in his or her power to better their performance. Even the best performances by athletes in the history of sport left a quarter of a percent here or a tenth of a percent there.

Once you realize that no one has ever had a perfect performance, you can move past the idea that you must be perfect and start pursuing excellence at your current entry level.

The idea of the countdown to competition is to give you actionable steps each day. Focus on moving toward greatness one baby step at a time. Little changes like shifting negative mental momentum or reframing a poor training day are the one percent changes that add up over time.

One percent over the course of 14 days is almost nothing. One percent compounded over a training year is substantial. One percent over the course of five years is the difference between good & gold.

Today's focus is about being mentally tough. That is, giving your best in the current moment. This is incredibly simple and incredibly difficult. This allows you to take pressure off yourself to always be your personal best. There are only brief moments in time when you can be at your absolute best. Rather, it is about being the best you can be in the current moment given the circumstances. If you can commit to being in the moment and nothing else, anxiety will melt into focus and poise.

The end goal should not be to remove that anticipation in the pit of your stomach to compete. It should be about learning to reinterpret those signals as excitement.

When you compete, you should be excited to showcase your abilities. You *will* be mentally tough, being the best you can be in a given moment. The next 14 days will empower you to change your performance anxiety into performance excitement.

**Action:** *In today's training session, be mentally tough. Focus on giving your best "right now" and let everything else go.*



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**13 Days**  
Until Competition

# IDENTIFYING YOUR PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

In order to beat performance anxiety, we have to define what you're up against.

People with performance anxiety report the following symptoms:

- Fast Breathing
- Elevated Heart Rate
- Sweating
- Butterflies in the stomach
- Muscular tension
- Self-talk (Negative)
- Concentration (Poor)

Chances are you read that list and thought negatively about each item. Let's take a closer look at each bullet and reframe that item.

**Fast Breathing, Elevated Heart Rate and Sweating** – for an athlete, these signals means you are warmed up and ready to go.

**Butterflies in the Stomach** – this is a feeling of blood being redirected. Vessels constrict in the digestive track to allow the muscles to have a greater supply. For an athlete, this means elevated performance.

**Muscular Tension** – every event requires tension. High strength and power events require greater tension and overall stiffness. Athletes use tension to their advantage.

**Self-Talk (Negative)** – this is a harmful habit. The inner dialogue you use to talk about yourself must change (covered day 6)

**Concentration (Poor)** – this is performance zapping. An athlete must keep focused. Staying mentally sharp is the difference between good and gold.

“Focus like a laser, not a flashlight”  
-Michael Jordan

Today you will focus on just that... focus.

**Action:** *In your training today, pay attention to when you lose focus. You will be amazed how many times your mind wanders even during a 10-minute event. When you catch yourself out of focus, don't get frustrated. Simply cue yourself back to focus on your movement, noting the change by saying the word “Focus.”*



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**12 Days**  
Until Competition

# CENTERING BREATH

## CONTROLLING YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM



Most of the symptoms of performance anxiety are caused by your sympathetic nervous system (SNS). SNS activation prepares you for “Fight or Flight.”

When the SNS is activated you get tunnel-vision, your heart races, your breathing is out of control, you experience indigestion, you can't recover and you become insulin resistant.

However, when you learn to control the SNS and bring it down into an optimal level, you become laser-focused, perceived exertion of exercise decreases and your body directs more fuel to your muscles.

As an athlete, the SNS can be your best friend or worst enemy. It can either help you rise in the biggest moment of your career or fall flat on your face.

Most athletes don't know how to control their nervous system, but it can be done. The most accessible way to control your nervous system as an athlete is to manipulate your breathing.

Fast, frantic breathing up in your chest elevate SNS activity. Slow, controlled breathing using your belly will decrease SNS activity.

It's no surprise that a competition that takes you to the limit of your capacity and puts you in extreme stress causes a strong SNS response. Yet to perform your best in that competition, you must be calm as you enter the storm.

Calm before the storm. You know that is what you need to be. However, in order to be you must do. How? Through use of a centering breath.

A centering breath is a long, relaxing breath that you take in the minutes or moments before a workout. It is a 6 second inhale, 2 second hold and a 7 second exhale, for a total of 15 seconds.

This centering breath, taken before your workout, can bring you to your optimal level of arousal. Notice how your breathing dictates how you feel before a workout, not just during it.

**Action:** *For each hard training piece, between now and your competition, take a centering breath (6-2-7) about one minute before the start of your workout.*

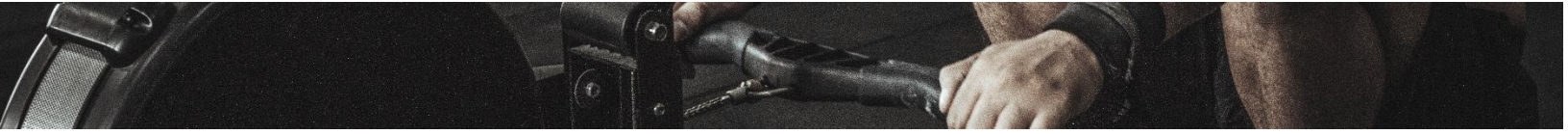


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**11 Days**  
Until Competition

# FINDING YOUR OPTIMAL LEVEL OF AROUSAL



Creatures of habit. Everyone is, but especially athletes. Each competitor has their way of preparing themselves for the competition floor and “getting in the zone.” Going for a walk, listening to music, taping up joints, putting on gear, prayer or reflection, visualization and the list goes on and on.

Each athlete must find the preparation that allows them to perform at their best. And it shouldn't be overlooked. Consider pre-competition rituals to be the mental equivalent of a physical warmup. It is vital to the athlete. Without it, performance wanes and risks rise.

No two athletes should have an identical warm-up, right? The same holds true for pre-competition rituals. There is no set way. There is better and worse, but only you can determine what is optimal for you.

Think, what allows me to perform at my best? *That* is optimal.

Think about arousal as the intensity of your excitement for a moment.

On a scale from 1 to 10, a one would be low arousal, very relaxed and calm. A ten would be incredibly excited, hyped up and intense.

Take a moment to ask yourself, what is my optimal level of arousal to compete at?

There isn't a right answer here. I've worked with incredible athletes on both ends of the spectrum, one an eight and one a two. It's a matter of finding where you can be at your best.

Not every type of event will have the same optimal level of arousal. A sprint-style event might mean optimal is on or two points higher and a very long event could land you two or three points lower.

**Action:** *Pick three different types of workouts to test over the next three days. Before and after completing each, determine what is your optimal level of arousal on a scale of 1 to 10.*



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# 10 Days

Until Competition

# YOUR MENTAL APPROACH TO TRAINING VERSUS COMPETING



A common saying in the Navy Seals is...

“You don’t rise to the occasion, you sink to the level of your training. Train well.”

While on the surface this guide focuses on competing, the deeper you dive the more you will realize everything starts in practice (training). You get limited opportunities to compete, maybe a few times per year, while you get daily opportunities to get better at training.

Therefore, beginners are almost always better at practicing than competing. A mark of a veteran athlete is competing at a higher level than they train. A veteran is tough in training, but tougher in competition.

However, training and competing have different purposes. The goal of competing is to do your very best through maximizing your strengths and minimizing weaknesses.

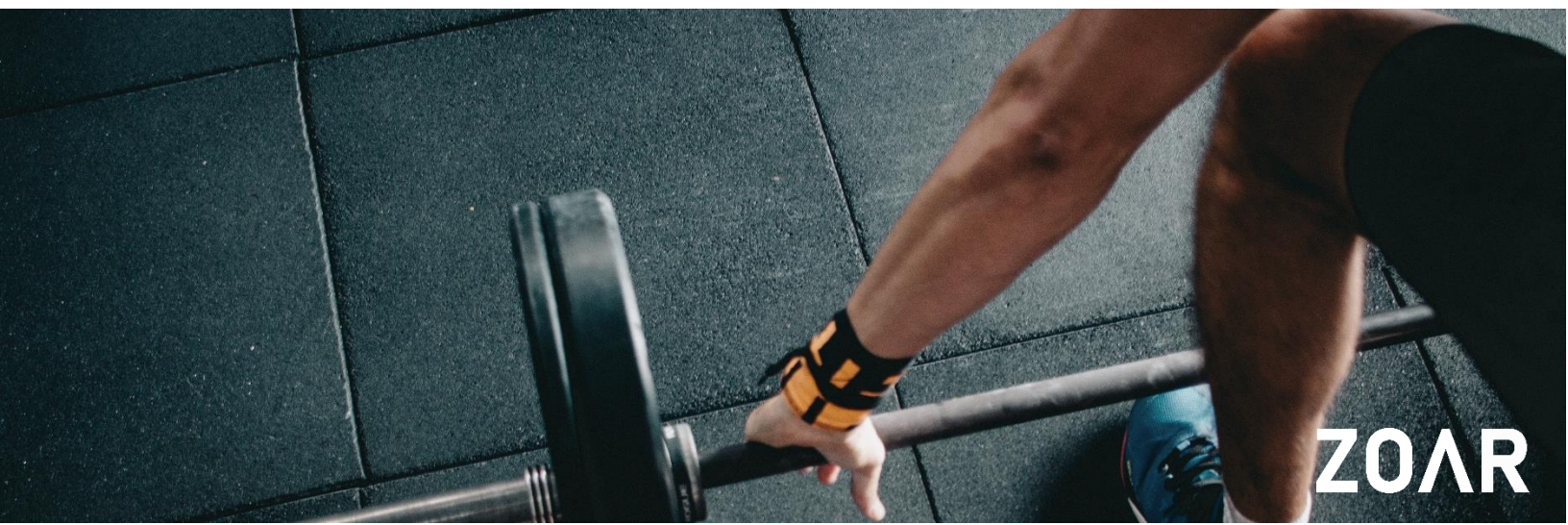
Training should be the opposite. There is no need to work on your strengths most of the time. The daily goal should be to expose weaknesses and address them.

So...if you have identified one of your weaknesses as the skill of competing, due to anxiety, then why not spend time practicing that skill.

Dedicate time to learning the skill of competing.

You can practice competing two different ways:

- 1) Sign up for a “Tune-up” Competition: Sign up to compete with no expectations and without assigning a high level of care. Don’t even think about this as a competition. Think of it as practice or training, simply an opportunity to improve your skills, refine your routines, implement strategy, mantra, visualization and anything else you have been working on.
- 2) Action: *Create opportunities to compete in day-to-day workouts: Grab a training partner or two and decide that a workout segment is a competition. You aren’t trying to work on weaknesses; you are trying to get the best score or time possible. You are trying to beat your training partner(s). You should take it seriously and you should go 100%. This will help refine your ability to compete as a skill.*



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# 9 Days

Until Competition

## FEAR SETTING TECHNIQUES

**"A goal without a plan is just a wish."**

Popularized by Tim Ferriss, fear setting is very similar to goal setting. In goal setting you identify a specific goal and what steps you need to take to achieve it. In fear setting, you identify your fears and what would happen if they came true.

Once your fears are on paper, you've captured your thoughts. There is no need to have your mind racing all day with them...there they are, right in front of you.

For people with anxiety about any number of things, fear setting can be extremely helpful.

**Action:** *Grab a notebook or something with at least three pages to write on.*

*Divide page one into 3 columns.*

*In column one (Define): First record all your fears surrounding competing, including your worst-case scenarios. Try to get a minimum of five. Ask yourself, "What if I...?" (e.g. ...fail to lift the Rx weight?)*

*In column two (Prevent): For each column one item ask yourself, "What can I do to prevent or minimize this from happening?" (e.g. extra mobility the week of the event, take time to do all my progressions in warmups, etc.)*

*In column three (Repair): For each item on your list, imagine the worst-case scenario does happen. Ask yourself, "What could I do to fix it or repair the damage even if it's only a little bit?" (e.g. perform better on the next workout)*

*On your next page answer the question, "What might the benefits be of success or even partial success?"*

*On the last page answer the question, "What is the cost of inaction?" Answer for 3 months, 6 months and 12 months.*

*Set your paper off to the side to review later (or)*

*Rip up your paper and throw it away.*



# 8 Days

Until Competition

# DIVERSIFYING YOUR SELF WORTH

Fear-setting can be very helpful in identifying unrealistic or undefined fears, but many of our fears are well justified.

Sometimes an athlete's entire year (or even career) comes down to a single moment. How are you supposed to be cool, calm and collected on the starting line if so much is on the line?

The answer is you can't. The best athletes in the world often have a way to cope with this reality. Even a simple mantra like "I am enough" helps athletes internalize the idea that they don't need to become a champion to have value.

It's a simple way to pull some amount of value or weight away from the moment.

It's call diversifying your self-worth. Basically, it's developing a working understanding that your value isn't solely wrapped up in the results of a competition.

This may sound easy, but to an athlete who trains year-round to be champion in one discipline, it is anything but easy.

In my experience, athletes who experience performance anxiety place a lot of weight on the outcome of an event. They may feel they will not be loved if they do not perform. Or they are letting down their family, friends and coaches with a subpar performance.

In my experience, athletes who can remove this added pressure by diversifying their self-worth also disperse some of their anxiety around a performance.

While your investment into the activity might be singular in focus, having a mental approach that is multi-faceted will help you perform at your best.

**Action:** Write down your answer to the question, "Who are you?" Have your answer include aspects besides your identity as an athlete.



# 7 Days

Until Competition

# VISUALIZATION TECHNIQUES

## YOUR MENTAL DRESS REHEARSAL



Visualization is one of the most powerful tools to unlocking next level performance in any domain.

This is especially true for any physical endeavor because you get limited reps with your body while you get unlimited reps with your mind.

You can only practice your competitive events a few times at full intensity (at most), while you can visualize them at or above your current maximum intensity in your mind.

Further, visualization can be something that your physical performance can never be: perfect.

In your mind you can see yourself having perfect technique, speed, execution, feel, activation, timing, etc. You can be better than you have ever experienced physically.

And the best part is the more you visualize your next level performance, the more likely it is to come true.

Visualization has been used for decades by various high performers and top athletes. Take the words of long jump world record holder Mike Powell,

“Right before I jump I visualization each step as I bound down the runway, hitting the board, my drive phase and my motion in the air. I think about jumping out the back of the pit. Then I land and hear the roar of the crowd and I celebrate. Then, I go and do it.”

**Action:** *Visualize Your Perfect Competition*

- 1) *What to do you see? (The venue, weather, fans, competitors, time of day, etc.)*
- 2) *How does your body feel? (Before: Optimal level of arousal, centering breath) (During: laser focus, perfect technique, relaxed)*
- 3) *What emotions are you experiencing? (excitement, good butterflies, tranquil before, exhibiting “heart” during, celebratory after)*
- 4) *Who is there watching you? What are they saying, expressing and feeling?*





# 6 Days

Until Competition

# UTILIZING POSITIVE SELF-TALK



In my experience working with athletes, changing negative self-talk to positive is the biggest difference between mentally weak and mentally strong competitors.

When an event exposes a weakness, I mentally weak competitor runs the script, “I’ve never been good at this style workout, I’ll do my best to limit the damage. We’ll see.”

A mentally tough competitor runs the script, “I work on my weaknesses relentlessly. Other competitors haven’t been willing to put in the time and energy that I have. It’s time to showcase what I’ve been working on.”

You’ll notice that both were honest. Neither said that this is going to be an easy win or even a top finish. Positive self-talk is taking every situation and framing it in a helpful rather than harmful light.

In the examples of negative and positive self-talk both were about limiting damage. However, the former creates negative momentum and energy in the body and mind while the latter encourages the athlete’s best performance.

Positive self-talk is that which allows you to be mentally tough. That is, be at your best in each given moment. Negative self-talk sets you up to fail at being mentally tough.

Positive self-talk can also take the form of encouragement. Telling yourself in a difficult moment, even out loud on occasion, “You got this.” Research has shown that the third person (“you”) is more helpful than the first person (“I”). Imagining someone you love or respect very much telling you. This is especially helpful when the person holds an emotional charge. For example, imagine your recently deceased mother telling you “You got this.” The results can be powerful.

**Action:** *Today, focus on identifying negative self-talk. Once it is identified, it can then be replaced. Pick your most challenging aspect of training today and in the moments before, during and after completing it, pay attention to the language and inner dialogue surrounding it. Each time you notice negative self-talk, reword it to be positive and affirmative. Aim for 100% positive thought replacement.*





# 5 Days

Until Competition

## REFRAMING TECHNIQUES: LEVEL OF CARE



Athletes who experience performance anxiety are often highly invested in the activity. It makes sense that you would be nervous, stressed and overall anxious for a moment you prepared for all year.

This isn't exclusive to athletics. Any event that requires significant planning and preparation often evokes stress and brings out emotion. Think about graduation, job interviews, weddings and having children. Each can be highly anticipated and often carries a high level of care.

For some athletes, this can hinder performance by magnifying physiological symptoms that come along with anxiety (see Day 13).

The dichotomy here is that as an athlete your high level of care is probably what allowed you to develop the fitness to get to such a high level in the first place.

This is why so many high performing athletes have performance anxiety...they expect themselves to perform at a high level. In many cases, it is unacceptable to have a sub-par performance.

In some cases, the daily grind required to be a high-performer leads to burnout. The athlete doesn't have the same level of care anymore that they once had. Interestingly, in some cases this leads the athlete to perform better at competitions than they ever have in the past.

In those cases, the athlete's level of care is at a level that allows them to perform at their best.

The lesson that can be gleaned here is just like level of arousal, there is also an individualized optimal level of care.

Often for athletes who experience performance anxiety, it can be helpful to downplay the weight of a moment. Even slightly convincing yourself that the results matter less than you think can be helpful for calming your nerves.

Saying to yourself, "Regardless of how I perform in this event, my family will still love me. Now go out there and have fun with it."

**Action:** *The next time you are in a performance environment (like a fitness test or competitive training day) practice using different self-talk techniques that alter your level of care.*

*Experiment with different sayings to find what puts you at an optimal level.*





# 4 Days

Until Competition

# GAME DAY NUTRITION STRATEGIES

The longer the competition is the more important fueling on game day becomes. Depleting stores and failing to have readily accessible fuel during multiple event competitions and longer events is a death sentence for an athlete's hopes of gold.

In general, the advice around game day nutrition is do the same for a competition as you would on a training day. Whatever you do, don't experiment with something new.

While you don't want to try something new, the reality is the demands of competition aren't always the same as training.

On a normal training day, you aren't stressed, and you probably choose the frequency of your training pieces.

The role of the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) when you are stressed has implications for how you should fuel on game day. When the SNS is activated blood is pulled away from the gut so digestion slows. Because of this you want to eat easily digestible foods.

While foods like vegetables and meat are normally very healthy, beneficial cornerstones of an athlete's nutrition, they should be avoided on game day. Rather, foods high in simple carbohydrates like fruits, juices, granola bars and white rice are your friend on competition day.

Also micronized protein like amino acids and BCAAs are useful options. These foods will give you maximum energy with minimal gastric distress. Fat slows digestion so lipid intake on competition day should be lower than your average training day.

In addition, drinking enough fluids containing salt and other electrolytes will encourage proper inter and intracellular hydration levels.

**Action:** Take a few minutes to write down nutrition options for "game day." If you don't have them yet, go out and buy them before your competition. Don't wait until the night before. Focus on foods and drinks that you have many times and you know will digest easily with no gastric distress. Pick foods high in carbohydrates and low in fats.



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**3 Days**  
Until Competition

# CREATING A PERSONAL MANTRA

Several of the techniques identified in your countdown to competition focused on control and composure. Competitions can be chaos so controlling every factor you can is important, yet there will always be things out of your control.

**Action:** *As many factors as possible that impact your performance on competition day (e.g. nutrition, weather, other competitor's attitudes, your thoughts, etc.)*

*Take that list and draw a line through every item you can control.*

One of the things you should have said were under your control is your mindset. However, learning to control your mind and your thoughts is really challenging, especially when performance anxiety comes into play.

One of the ways an athlete can exhibit control over a moment is through reciting a personal mantra. Think of a mantra as a one sentence statement about your identity that encourage your best performance.

A few years ago I developed mine... "Poised & Patient, Flow Focused, Attack with Heart."

At the time I was dealing with performance anxiety and before the start of the workout my heart rate and level of arousal would be way above my optimal.

Combining a centering breath followed by reciting my personal mantra, helped lower my SNS activity and get me into an optimal level of arousal.

For me, each word had meaning attached to it and it evoked the best response out of me.

Another example of a personal mantra for an athlete might be... "I am efficient & strong, relaxed aggression."

**Action:** *Create your own personal mantra. Once you have settled on your wording, commit it to heart. Today before each challenging workout or lift, recite it. On your competition day, let your personal mantra pull you into your best mindset.*



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# 2 Days

Until Competition

## USING YOUR TOOLBOX IMPLEMENTING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED



The work is put in, both from a physical and mental standpoint. It's soon time to compete. The tools that you have developed over your countdown to competition will serve you well.

Now it's time to put it all together. It's about synthesizing your skills and maximizing your resources.

There is no right or wrong way to use your skills. Some you will find more useful or effective than others. This is normal. It's about finding and developing a few tools that help you manage your anxiety and stress and maximizing their impact.

Take a moment to note which of the following techniques have been particularly helpful to you: fear-setting, the centering breath, visualization, reciting your personal mantra, finding your optimal level of arousal, using positive self-talk and optimizing game day nutrition.

Now take those two or three most effective techniques and find ways to combine them.

Maybe it's combining a guided breathing session with visualization techniques.

Maybe it's using your personal mantra with a centering breath.

Maybe it's mid-workout positive self-talk combined with a performance word "focus."

Maybe it's journaling the morning of your competition with fear-setting and working to diversify your self-worth and reduce level of care.

**Action:** *Take a few moments to conceptualize what will be the most helpful combination of techniques. How will you execute them on the day of your event to give you an edge over the competition?*





# 1 Day

Until Competition

# 3, 2, 1 ... GO

## REVISITING PERFORMANCE EXCITEMENT



It's time.

You should be excited.

Showcasing your skills, both those you've had for many years and those which you've recently developed, should get you wound up.

Wound it in a good way. The kind of wound up that drives an incredible performance, one way above the level you are able to train at consistently.

It's time to showcase talent in combination with hard work. You have earned the right to be confident going into "game day."

You have an edge over your competition. You took the time to work on your weaknesses. You did the hard work of plugging holes and reinforcing soft spots.

You didn't just learn a new set of mental skills, you put them into practice. Daily.

You're committed.

Before this countdown to competition began, you said you would follow through and complete all 14 days and you did.

You will continue to be committed.

You will continue to chase greatness at every turn and in every aspect of your game.

For you, this competition is just the beginning. You are capable of more.

Get excited to compete. As an athlete, this is what you do. This is what you have trained for.

You have the techniques. You have the knowledge. You have the skill.

It's Time.

**Action: Crush your competition with confidence using your new skills!**



# ZOAR

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**“For instructors the desired response is learning. This should be evident not just in how you teach but in who you are.”**

Ben is a health & fitness coach, CrossFit Competitor and business owner. Ben has always been drawn to a physical practice. Growing up he played an array of sports (including wrestling, soccer, and track), but soon he came to the realization that he enjoyed training just as much as competing. After his college sports career ended, Ben dove head first into the functional fitness world and began competing in CrossFit. Tinkering with every training modality, implement, and method he could get his hands on became a daily muse. Pushing the body and mind to new limits brought about immense learning, often through experimentation and play. Despite his personal accomplishments, Ben has been fortunate to enlist the help of countless coaches, teachers and mentors. Curiosity drives his flywheel and allows for a continually deeper understanding.

“My goal with ZOAR Fitness is to provide you guidance for functional movements to improve your capacity. I started ZOAR Fitness as a way to create a window for others to see into my mind. I eat, sleep and breathe fitness. In the words of Graham Duncan, ‘Everyone’s genius is right next to their dysfunction.’ For me, training for CrossFit is a script that never stops running in my mind. I noticed early on that the way I think about movement and training is different from other people. My goal with ZOAR is to share my knowledge and experience with athletes and coaches to elevate the level of movement in our community. I love to move, develop new skills and see people I care about succeed.”





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