CONTINUING EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS

Course Title:

COMPETITION STRATEGIES

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PSA Education Department

CER Topic Area:
Rules of Sport

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PROFESSIONAL SKATERS ASSOCIATION

COURSE INTRODUCTION

Notice:
By signing on to take the course/exam, you certify that you are the person signing on and personally completing this course/exam. False statements made by anyone taking this course/exam may result in disciplinary action, up to and including, expulsion from the PSA both for the person taking the course/exam and the person listed as the taker of the course/exam. Successful completion of this course/exam is worth 1 credit towards the U.S. Figure Skating Continuing Education Requirement (CERs).

COURSE OBJECTIVE

This course will discuss and guide coaches to:

- Identify, develop, and apply competitive sport strategies and specific tactics appropriate for the age and skill levels of the participating individual skaters, couples, or teams
- Develop and monitor goals for the individual skaters, couples or teams and the program
- Provide appropriate competition preparation practice
- Implement strategies based on previously learned techniques appropriate to the age and ability levels of the skaters
- Effective management of the skater and the support team, pre-, during and post competition

COURSE INTRODUCTION

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PART 1: Introduction

Points for Self-Reflection

When planning for competition readiness, coaching and management style can play a key role. Looking retrospectively at coaches who have had consistent competitive success, many are ultimately stronger managers of their athletes and assistant coaching staff versus purely being strong technical coaches. Self-analysis in this respect can help coaches set our own expectations as a coach and help us find members of our teams who can complement our strengths.

Competition Ready Parents

Parental support is a valuable, commonly cited factor when looking at competitive success. In the stress of competition, parents can be a great asset to maintaining a positive environment, and conversely, can be a point of distraction - sometimes both simultaneously in the same competition.

While the parenting style of the athlete's parents undoubtedly will affect everything in the athlete's realm, it is unlikely that the coach will cause major changes in their parenting style. As such, coaches should decide where their professional boundaries are early in the relationship. Finding a way to communicate effectively with the parent and creating a healthy parent-coach dynamic is a key to long-term success with the athlete, both in training and especially in the high-stress competition environment. Typically, these discussions are more effective during a low pressure time of the season when everyone is calmer and more receptive rather than in the heat of the moment at a competition or shortly thereafter.

PART 2: Competition Readiness

Good competitive results are most likely to occur when an athlete is both healthy and well-prepared for a competition. Most coaches innately desire to make the best choices for their athletes. After all, when the athletes perform well, it reflects on the coach. The most successful coaches do everything they can to ensure that their athletes experience their greatest level of potential at competitions.

Key points for being competition ready:

Technical	The technical proficiencies of the athlete – ability to perform technical elements correctly and consistently.
Tactical	The planned program content for each competition; the selection of competitions to maximize training and reach the athlete and coach's ultimate performance goals at the most important competitions of the season.
Physical	The physiological preparation of the athlete to be able to execute the selected program content in the confines of the program.
Cognitive	The mental preparation of the athlete to be able to execute the program under the pressure and distractions of the competition.

To evaluate the athlete's preparedness for competition, we must refer back to the seasonal planning and goal setting, and then utilize tracking and reflection.

Prepare > Organize > Work > Evaluate > Reconsider!

PART 3: Seasonal Planning for Competition Readiness

Since competition readiness originates with and is a product of the yearly training plan, the athlete's preparedness is *heavily* dependent on the thoroughness and execution of it. Without a well-thought out, well-executed seasonal plan, the ability to organize, assess and implement successful strategies will likely be lost.

Qualities of a Strong Plan:

The components of a yearly plan are reviewed here briefly:

- Identifies competitions on the calendar
- Ranks the importance of each event (athletes should know what the most important competition of the season is and be able to tell you about their goals for each competition)
- Identifies additional important dates on the calendar such as skating obligations, and other life events like school finals, vacations, etc.
- Plans the type, intensity, volume, and timing of training in a way designed to reach seasonal performance goals, while being flexible enough to meet the changing needs of the athlete
- Simultaneously pushes the athlete to reach seasonal goals and advances year over year (i.e., a strong off-season plan launches the athlete into the next season without unnecessarily retreading ground) – the seasonal plan thinks bigger than one season
- Places value on and measures athletic performance and on-ice skills mastery as well as evaluating performance in competition and competitive results

PART 4: Goal Setting for Competition Readiness

"Mastery Goals" and "Outcome Goals"

Mastery goals are those that are *specific*, *challenging*, and *under the control* of the coach and athlete. *Outcome goals* (typically competitive results) can be highly motivating but can be tenuous because they are not fully under the control of coach and athlete.

The challenge becomes to identify which mastery goals, if reached, will help create the outcome goals you hope for in this season and beyond. Other considerations in goal setting include:

- Working as a team, what do the coach and athlete hope to accomplish this competitive season?
- What is the most important competition this season?
- What technical elements do the coach and athlete expect to perform in the competition program this season, and how does this align with the expectations of the parent?
- What technical elements are required by the current competitive level, and what is the timeline needed for the athlete to be able to perform these elements?
- Does this change with different competitions and across the timeline?
- Is there a plan to set or change mastery goals throughout the season? What is the plan if the athlete is failing to meet performance milestones as the season progresses?
- What is the expectation of the athlete in their performance as they go through various training phases of the season? Will certain phases of training (for example, heavy strength phase off the ice) temporarily interfere with performance on the ice, and what is the plan to balance this?

Sample Competition Readiness Plan Outline

"Competition Readiness" is the process by which all competitive athletes and their coaches prepare strategically for the upcoming competitive figure skating season. The foundation of competition readiness lies in planning. Seasonal planning in particular allows you to identify, discuss, understand, and execute all factors that affect your daily and competition performance. These factors include but are certainly not limited to:

1) Goals
    - Big/small; short- term; long-term
2) Assessment
    - Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities for improvement, threats
3) Needs
    - Athlete, coach, parent, support team
4) Resources
    - Personal/professional, human/financial
5) Roles
    - Athlete, coach, parent, support team
6) Expectations
    - Athlete, coach, parent

A well-designed, well-communicated seasonal plan will promote physical and mental fitness, and significantly reduce the risk of the common issues of injury and physical and mental stamina. A good seasonal plan also levels expectations and equalizes your team's vision of performance. Competition readiness is the process of preparing strategically for such performance.

Competition Readiness Checklist

Coaches should direct their athletes to complete, or help them arrange to complete through their club or federation, the following aspects of competition readiness annually:

- **Seasonal plan:**
    - Strategic plan
    - Event calendar – a list of all planned important competitions and dates
    - Fitness plan

- **Summer intentions:**
    - Summer competition calendar
    - Planned program content sheet
    - Pre-participation exam– sports physical ideally performed by a sports medicine physician or the athlete's primary care physician
    - Completion of a feedback session/monitoring session by an official
    - Sports psychology education and one-on-one consultation
    - Sports nutrition education and one-on-one consultation

Competition Readiness Strategic Plan (To be provided for the athlete)

Ultimate Performance Goal
Define your single ultimate performance goal for this season in terms of total program points and competition placement.

S.W.O.T. Analysis – Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats.
Describe your current strengths and weaknesses and your anticipated opportunities and threats.

- Weaknesses are generally current features that you know you can improve upon, whereas threats are challenges you anticipate will need to be overcome in order to reach your ultimate performance goal.

- Strengths are current features that consistently contribute to your success and require some maintenance, whereas opportunities are features that are or may become available to you that you have yet to take advantage of.

- SWOTs may be any combination of physical, mental, financial, social, and competitive factors.

- SWOTs may be associated with your physical development and/or the situation around you.

- Describe SWOTs relative to how they impact your performance in general and how they may contribute to or work against your ultimate performance goal.

Objectives
Describe up to five objectives you plan to meet that will lead you to your ultimate performance goal.

- Objectives must be specific, attainable, and directly related to your ultimate performance goal.

- Objectives must be described with details that demonstrate how they are related to your ultimate performance goal and how you plan to achieve them.

- Examples of acceptable objectives: working on speed, fixing cheated triple Axel, spinning faster, mental training, choreography, improving flexibility. Extra day-to-day general lessons not directly related to a specific objective are not acceptable.

Commitment

The following statement of commitment must be included in your seasonal plan:
"We, the athlete and the coach, have jointly developed this seasonal plan. We agree to adhere to this seasonal plan and to develop and maintain a level of health and fitness in the athlete that will enable him/her to train and compete without injury or illness. In the event that the athlete becomes injured and/or ill to the extent that they are unable to train consistently, effectively, and according to this seasonal plan, we agree to take reasonable measures to help the athlete recover, especially those measures recommended by a qualified physician or healthcare professional. We understand that in the case of such injury or other significant and unforeseen incidents, this seasonal plan may require adjustment, in which case we agree to collectively revise the plan to meet the developmental needs of the athlete and with respect to the ultimate performance goal."

To be followed by signatures of athlete(s) and primary coach.

Fitness Outline

In figure skating when we think about "strength and conditioning," what we are typically referring to is not just strength training and cardiovascular conditioning, but everything that goes into training in addition to on-ice training (technical elements). The purpose of the following checklist is to provide a starting point for athletes, coaches, and trainers to consider when designing and supplementing their existing training routines.

Keep in mind that while these checklist items are geared towards particular aspects of the training routine, all of these areas come together to integrate into the overall training routine. Some exercises serve multiple purposes; for example, the injury prevention routine that includes ankle strengthening and coordination exercises is likely to also improve jump performance. Athletes consider each of the points listed here and outline their plan in a few sentences.

Read through the numbered items in the checklist below and write a brief note (one to three sentences) describing how your off-ice (and on-ice, where applicable) training routine reflects each area.

Include each of the following (give specific examples)

1) **Dynamic warm-up routine:**
    - To be done every day prior to getting on the ice (10-30 minutes)

2) **Mobility for performance and injury prevention:**
    - Including dynamic and passive stretching

3) **Agility and coordination training for:**
    - Skills enhancement, proprioception, and injury prevention

4) **Injury prevention exercises:**
    - Core training for back stability, balance, proprioception (especially lower extremity), and foot/ankle strengthening for impact injury prevention.

5) **Strength and power training:**
    - General base of total body strength for ability to train and for injury prevention
    - Sports-specific strength and power work - explosive jumping, lifting, etc.

6) **Cardiovascular/endurance training:**
    - Aerobic energy system to support endurance and recovery, ability to train effectively throughout a freestyle session
    - Anaerobic energy system - bursts of energy as needed, ability to execute jumps, lifts, etc.
    - Aerobic/anaerobic system - sustained intensity throughout the program, tolerance to lactic acid accumulation
    - Program performance/sports-specific conditioning
    - Balance with body composition and energy intake

7) **Recovery routine:**
    - Recovery warm-down - flexibility, muscle recovery (rolling), massage
    - Recovery nutrition plan - to help your body be ready for the next training session
        - In training
        - For competition day eating
        - For competition day recovery nutrition

PART 5: Tracking Competition Readiness Development

When designing a strong seasonal plan, coaches will need ways to track the progress of the athlete as they develop throughout the season. Typically, athletes, parents and coaches use past competition performance as the primary means of assessing future competition readiness. While we can agree that an athlete who is running clean or near-clean programs in training is prepared to do this in competition, there are other parameters that are useful in indicating that an athlete is competition ready as well.

We can understand that there are times, particularly at the beginning of each season, where the athlete is still mastering technical skills and learning new programs, so program consistency is not an available parameter, at this part of the season. This leaves the question of how to evaluate progress, and how to use this information to adjust the training plan if the athlete is not improving as anticipated.

Coaches need to find and use performance parameters to help to indicate that the athlete is on track for the appropriate time in the season and is likely to give a good performance in the most important competition(s) of the season. Information comes in all shapes and sizes but needs to be recorded to be useful. Memory alone is a fairly poor way of collecting information, and lacks tangibility to the coach, athlete, and parent. A good record of what has transpired in the athlete's training over the previous season(s) is going to allow a coach to find patterns in how the athlete is performing over the season and will help not just with success in performance but also greatly aid in injury prevention.

Tracking and Assessment

First, the athlete's success and failure rate of elements within the programs needs to be tracked. Using a program tracking sheet to follow the progress of your athlete's performance daily is a valuable tool for doing so. Create a chart that has ten columns across the top and on the left side leave space for up to twelve elements. Each day have the athlete track what they land and what they miss. This should include any pops, falls, step-outs, and perceived levels on their steps and spins. If the athlete is in a lesson with a coach and running a program, the coach can track that run through and the athlete track the ones outside the lessons. For a younger athlete or one who is unfamiliar with the process, the coach should track the programs at first and teach them how to keep track on their own.

PROGRAM TRACKING

NAME: _____

SHORT

ELEMENTS	DATE / TIME										AVERAGE 100%

LONG

ELEMENTS	DATE / TIME										AVERAGE 100%

At the end of ten run throughs, tally up the percentage of each element in the program. Do this for both the short and free program. Seven of ten double Axels is a 70% success rate. Tracking of the program this way allows the coach and athlete to see patterns of both error and success.

Consistency Drills

Next, track the elements outside of the program in the same format. A similar chart can be used. So too can running a consistency drill. A consistency drill requires the athlete to perform three of each element in a row without any kind of failure. Compare the findings of the elements outside the program and their consistency when done back-to-back three times in a row. This increases the coach's awareness of the athlete's strengths and weaknesses and can develop the athlete's confidence as they see that they are improving week to week. If they are struggling with the consistency drill, this allows the coach the chance to step back, review, and analyze the technique of the elements. Is the element lacking height, slow angular momentum? If so, work to improve those weaknesses before placing that element into a program.

Section Training

Further to tracking of programs and elements outside of the program, begin tracking the actual sections of the programs. Have the athlete break the program into three or four parts depending on the length of the program. During training, select a day with section-training as the priority. Challenge the athlete to complete the section three times successfully in a row. Do this for each of the sections separately. Next, have them perform two sections together: 1 & 3, 2 & 4, 1 & 2, 3 & 4, 1 & 4. Then link 1 & 2 with 3, 2 & 3 with 4.

When they have accomplished this, the next step is to link the sections together for a full program run through. All these tracking steps will show the athlete that progress is occurring in what can seem like a slow process sometimes. This will encourage the athlete to stay motivated as they see progress. It also allows them to use a technical perception and self-regulate their emotional responses better. On the days they feel frustrated and want to say, "I never land my double Axel," you will now have visual and absolute proof that they land it 70% of the time in the program, 90% out of the program, not *"never*" which is of course 0%. You can address the negative self-talk and tackle the jumps that the athlete is missing 30 % from a technical not an emotional viewpoint.

Analyze

It is now the coach's job to assess if the tracking lines up. Does the athlete have a much higher success rate with a jump out of the program than in it? If yes, could they be tired or dizzy from a spin. ***If you can find a design flaw in the layout of the program, change it*.**

If the athlete is particularly tired, check in with the off-ice trainer. Is the athlete training all three energy systems? If yes, now you need to consider other causes for tiredness in the program. Is there asthma present? If yes, are they using their inhaler? Are there any other health concerns that should be addressed? Maybe they are holding their breath in a spin and

that is exhausting them prior to a big jumping pass. By tracking you will have a map to follow and make decision-based on facts rather than assumptions and emotions.

Athlete Wellness Reporting

Athlete Wellness Reporting
Number of jumps or other technical elements performed
Jump consistency/quality
Elements successfully/ unsuccessfully performed in training program run-throughs
Type and amount of off-ice training completed
Loading in off-ice training (progression of weights and reps, etc.)
Total hours trained each day
Program and jump video
Elements successfully/unsuccessfully performed in program in competition
Number of hours slept per night
Athlete's self-reported soreness after training
Athlete's and coach's independently reported rating of effort and productivity each training day
Evaluation of athleticism/athletic abilities, typically done via standardized testing
Growth and development over time (height, weight, body composition, etc.)
Nutrition/eating habits, such as amount, type, and timing of food consumed
Other health indicators like bone density, iron, and Vitamin D levels, etc.
Dates of any injuries sustained, planned rehabilitation schedule, and course of return to play

Athlete Wellness Reporting

Athlete wellness reporting includes:

- **Productivity:**
  This should consist of self-analysis from the athlete and evaluation from the coach pertaining to the athletes' progress and can be daily, weekly, monthly, training phase, ability to meet competition performance goals, etc. If the athlete and coach have vastly different and/or persistently different opinions of the athlete's productivity, the plan should be revisited and reevaluated.

- **Health and wellness:**
  Pertaining to injury status and the health and wellness of the athlete, this report is derived from key feedback such as sleep status, soreness resulting from training, stress level, productivity, and effort. Coaches and athletes should independently rate productivity and effort. Soreness should be clarified with the athlete as often as necessary to find out if the soreness is pain related to training versus injury-related pain.

- **Nutritional status and plan:**
  Specific dietary advice, such as specific recommendations of food consumption, should come from a qualified professional like a Registered Dietitian. This is not to say that parents, trainers, coaches, and athletes should never have discussions about appropriate training and competition fueling, but the discussions should support a positive environment for performance fueling and discuss concepts and best practices.

  Coaches and parents should be aware that discussions pertaining to diet can often be perceived as code words for "fat" or implying that the athlete needs to lose weight. Weight, in and of itself, should not be the ultimate or only parameter for evaluating the athlete's fitness level. Weight alone does not tell us much (if anything) about an athlete's body composition and ability to perform.

  Additionally, weight has little to do with the healthfulness of the athlete's nutrition plan. Therefore, at least an annual visit to a qualified dietician is strongly advised, particularly in the adolescent athletes, trainers, coaches, and parents should not be giving specific dietary advice such as types and amounts of calories consumed and use of supplements.

- **Recovery status and plan:**
  Recovery is a critical aspect of training. Aspects of a recovery plan include:
  - Rest – both active and passive
  - Therapeutic recovery (foam rolling, massage, hot and cold baths)
  - Recovery nutrition
  - Scheduled mental and physical breaks from training and skating (and consideration as to what the athlete is doing during these breaks – College entrance exams and school finals are not high quality breaks)

Useful Information for Planning and Evaluating In-Competition Training and Performance

Athlete's training status going into competition:

- Has the athlete been physically able to execute program content consistently in training?
- How did this compare to the competition performance?

Athlete's mental status:

- If the athlete is physically prepared, is the athlete able to maintain focus to stay on task in training run-throughs?
- Is the athlete resilient such that when a mistake is made the athlete can carry on versus unraveling through the rest of the program?
- How does element execution in training compare to element execution in competition?

Athlete's injury status:

- Is the athlete injured or sick? If so, the first question prior to continuing with the competition should be "Can this athlete participate in the competition without risk of serious or permanent injury?" (This question should be answered by a qualified care provider – ideally someone familiar with the athlete and/or the sport prior to the injury – and "opinion shopping" should be strongly discouraged in the athlete, parent, and coach.)
- If the athlete is injured and unlikely to heal without treatment and/or time off, what is the precise return to play plan and how does participating in the competition fit into the plan?
- How important is the competition if the athlete chooses to participate (or not)?
- What is the management plan for the athlete and his injury at the competition?

Nutritional status/plan in competition:

Game day fueling and best practices leading up to competition day. In general, encourage the athlete to try to do what they normally do.

- How can the athlete avoid greasy/salty hotel foods, meals at chain restaurants, and eating meals late at night?

Coach's plan and goals for themselves in competition.

The competition is not just for the athlete's development, it is for the coach's development as well. Coaches should spend some time reflecting on past competitions and make some goals pertaining to where they might like to do better.

PART 6: Compare and Evaluate

Athletes and coaches should be willing to spend time to compare and evaluate the athletes report card - the IJS "protocol sheet." Pre-season competitive events allow the athlete to try out new programs and elements. It is also a chance for the coach to see what their athlete is doing well in comparison to their peers in the same category. In order to do this the coach must know where to find the latest Scale of Values from the ISU.

Check the ISU website https://www.isu.org for research and information. Doing the math based on the points the athlete earned in the early season events and assessing what they could do differently to increase the TES or technical element score are keys to success. Keep in mind that different countries have different bonus structures for the Novice and lower categories, and those bonuses can affect the TES as well. A coach should know where to check for these bonus structures and rules at their athletes National Sport Organization (NSO).

Finally, the grade of execution or GOE should also be considered as the coach looks at adding or removing elements. Sometimes an amazing level 2 spin is worth more than a mediocre level 3 when the GOE pluses are assigned to the element. Keeping pace with other competitors is another tool towards success. This will also allow a coach to encourage an athlete who may be reluctant to focus on the spins or step portions of a program. When the athlete sees in black and white that a level 3 step sequence with a GOE of plus 5 is worth the same as a triple loop they may start to train their steps with more intensity and detail.

PART 7: Competition-Like Environment

Competing means "getting comfortable being uncomfortable" as said by fitness trainer Jillian Michaels. Coaches should run a simulation day where the athlete has an opportunity in their home rink to simulate an event. Design this beginning with the off-ice warm-up, to the 6-minute warm-up, to the wait for the appropriate time to be athlete number five, etc., Some athletes really dislike being first to skate, so take this opportunity to have them skate first in the simulation. Others dislike skating later in the group and need to learn how to manage their thoughts and time between warm-up and being later in the group.

These simulations allow the athlete to have a higher level of anxiety and nerves than normal training days but without having a negative outcome that affects their entire season. Afterwards, take the time to discuss how they felt, what they could work on and improve to make the situation feel better for themselves.

Athletes should be aware of both the Program Components (PC) portion of their score and their TES score. Having in person monitoring with a technical specialist will allow the athlete to focus on the levels in which they are trying to achieve on elements such as spins, step or choreographic sequences. It will give them an opportunity to learn what a technical specialist is

looking for, how to achieve the levels, but more importantly it provides them with another performance opportunity that mimics competition.

The coach can also follow this up with an in person monitoring with a judge where the focus could be on the GOE of elements and the PC portion of the performance. The skating skills, presentation, musicality, and interpretation of the music. Having to perform on demand for the technical specialist and the judge creates anxious feelings and gives the athlete a chance to train their response to that anxiety.

Playing games to train is a skilled way to get the athlete to develop new skills without making them feel too overwhelmed with nerves. A simple game is to write down the elements in the athlete's program on pieces of paper. Have them draw one piece of paper knowing that the element they draw is the only element that counts in the next run through. If they miss that element, they will need to do another full run through later in the day. This puts pressure on one element and teaches them to adjust their focus and use keywords to allow that element to be successful. The coach can also have them draw the piece of paper but not tell them what the element is, then they skate the program thinking that each element is "*THE* "element that counts. This places pressure on every element.

Using the same pieces of paper or cards mix them up in a bowl or glove and have them draw the pieces out one by one. That is the order in which they must warm-up their jumps that session. Of course, this is done after a correct off ice warm-up and a good 5-10 minutes of on ice stroking so that the athlete is warm and will not become injured. But it is good to take them out of their routine.

Generally, athletes like to warm-up jumps in a particular order. Usually in a way that they feel is the easiest jump to hardest. But what if the athlete has an issue on the warm-up and can't warm-up every jump? They should be able to start their jumps in any order. Mixing the order can create a small level of performance anxiety for some athletes. Again, this is a beneficial performance opportunity with no risk.

The athlete can also draw cards or pieces of paper that have a transition listed on them. They choose the jump they wisht to perform first and then choose a card that shows a spiral or Ena Bauer or hydra blade etc. Now they must perform that jump and incorporate that transition skill prior to the jump or spin. This develops their repertoire of transitions and allows (and rehearses) a small bit of anxiousness as they train the jumps "differently" from their normal routine.

Participating in summer events or off-season events is the best way to use a less competitive environment to rehearse for more important competitions later. Most athletes have preparatory events in the early portion of their season. Rarely do athletes show up for Nationals or the World Championships without having done a few previous events earlier in the year. These preparatory events allow the coach and athlete the chance to review, analyze and

redesign before the big event of the season. These pre- competitive events also allow for the opportunity to train their response to events.

Keep in mind the optimum wording here is ***some*** summer or off-season events, not a **lot**. Parents can be eager to get their athlete in as many competitions as possible under the impression that the judges will "*know them"* better or they will have more success later in the year because they have competed at every event offered from May to August. This is not the case and can lead to burn out and limits time to further develop skills. What should be kept in mind is that mental training is the biggest portion of a successful competition, so training is imperative, but like all aspects of training, coaches need to know when to taper that off. This leads us to the next part, mental training.

PART 8: The Mental Game

It doesn't matter if it's gymnastics, figure skating or whatever, it's being able to run through the drills, through the program. Going into a major competition you need to be 90% accurate, and if you can't do that, then you're not physically prepared to perform well in competition. But it's not just physical –psychologically, you have to be strong enough to go out there despite all obstacles, distractions, and people who try to upset you. Mental toughness is so imperative because otherwise you can fall apart. So, I think developing that mental toughness is very important – especially developing the feeling of confidence within you that you can do it, that you are good, and you are worthy of success.

-Frank Carroll, World and Olympic Champion Coach

Athletes are strong and are revered for their strength, their control, and their ability to perform on demand. However, it has become noticeably clear that athletes experience doubt and fear the same as other people do. They have just learned how to manage it better.

Having a base line of understanding the athlete's frame of mind is helpful. Having them take a sport competition anxiety test also known as a SCAT test (see chart provided) is a wonderful way to create a foundation that allows them to open the discussion surrounding their perception of competitions. The SCAT test is a simple questionnaire that can give coaches a tip of the iceberg view into the type of competitor each athlete is. Some athletes function better than others with higher levels of anxiety. Knowing what level of anxiety the athlete works within will better allow the coach to set up further mental training tools for each individual athlete. Remind athletes that there are no right or wrong answers to the test, which answering truthfully will better serve their future needs.

The Performance Assessment form is a wonderful tool for allowing athletes and coaches to focus on what they can control at events. So often an athlete is focused solely on the outcome, which they cannot control. This questionnaire (see form provided) allows the athlete to set sport and personal specific goals for each individual event. The form should be given to the athlete prior to an event and discussed. It is at this point that aligning with the athletes' specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time measurable (SMART) goals will occur.

If the athlete has never skated a clean program in practice but lists this a goal at the upcoming event, this gives the coach the opportunity to realign the athlete's goal with something that is achievable and realistic. This will assist in creating a successful venture and will allow the athlete to build on the confidence they gain when they do achieve the goal. After the event, the form should be reviewed in a debrief with the athlete - A discussion on where changes could be made to improve at the next opportunity. It is also an opportunity for the athlete to express their needs regarding the coach's role at the event.

It is surprising how many athletes are never allowed to review their coach's role at events. Being able to express openly their needs such as, "I need you present while I warm-up off ice"

or “I really like to warm-up off-ice alone” gives the athlete a sense of control over their competitive participation. This take-charge feeling has a trickle-down effect and adds to the building of confidence.

After the athlete has completed the SCAT form and the performance assessment form, it is beneficial to discuss any revelations that have come from the information learned through that analysis. It could be time to consider hiring a professional mental trainer. If the coach feels that the athlete would benefit from working with someone in this field, this is a good time to invest in finding that person. Perhaps, starting small with a seminar for the club and the higher-level athletes training at the club would allow for some exposure in a group environment.

It may be decided that the athlete needs more one on one work with a sports psychologist. It can be daunting to search one out at first, but it will help both athlete and coach. Each of you will discover that working with a mental trainer in some form is a key component to success in the competitive venue.

There are specific skills that mental trainers can guide the athlete through that will have a significant impact on their future performances. The goal of working in the field of mental training is to combine the physical and mental control aspect of sport. In order to master this, the athlete will need to learn concentration drills and relaxation drills. Being able to concentrate “is a relaxed state of being alert, differing from anything held through willpower in that it can change its focus instantly to stay with the flow of competition” (Syser & Connolly, 1984.) Having a professional teach the three skills of attentional control to the athlete will allow them to have a much better mindset for competition. The three skills of attentional control are:

- Concentration
- Visualization
- Refocusing

A professional in the field of sports psychology can teach athletes many skills that are necessary tools to train. Someone who works in the field of mental training will know the steps on how to hone this skill. It is something that should be practiced throughout the season and not just brought out at stressful times like a test session or competition. The sports psychologist or mental coach can assist in teaching the athlete concentration drills, visualization skills, breathing exercises, the art of positive self-talk, resetting the moment and ultimately, how to manage their nerves, anxiety, and stress levels. Remember it is not about being stress free it is about “getting comfortable being uncomfortable.” For these skills to develop and work they need to be practiced with the same attention to detail as other on ice skills such as jumping or spinning.

PART 9: Peaking and the Yearly Plan

Finally, the yearly plan mentioned at the beginning of Level 3 needs to be the roadmap for coach, athlete, and parent. Following a yearly plan allows for goals, less overall stress for everyone. More importantly it provides the coach and athlete with a framework for the season. Highlighting the different periods of the season in relation to when to train certain energy systems and when to taper down is important to performance success. Tapering is known as the phase when the athlete reduces training volume and intensity. It is the part of the yearly plan that allows for “peaking or peak performances” to occur. Peaking refers to the increase of the intensity of simulated training, so training that focuses more on the ideas and suggestions from part three of this course. A yearly plan will include several of these tapering and peaking phases that will go in tandem with competitions. By practicing this method throughout the season, it will help prepare the athlete psychologically and physically to “peak” at their major event of the season.

PART 9: Checklist for an Approaching Competition

As the most important competition(s) of the season draws near, it becomes more important to be on top of preparation, enhance and showcase strengths, minimize weaknesses, and be steady by not over-reacting to challenges. For most athletes and coaches, the most important competition of the season is the highest qualifying competition the athlete reasonably expects to reach. This may be different for different athletes, but this checklist can be applied to any important competitive event, and should be individualized for the athlete and their developmental stage.

4 to 8 Weeks Prior to Competition	
Training	Training can still have high volume (number of hours trained per week), but the emphasis begins to shift to performance – the athlete's ability to execute the program cleanly and to plan – and moves away from developing the strength base and acquiring new technical elements
New Elements:	Putting an end point on introducing new technical elements in the program so that the emphasis turns to polishing and focusing on intensity of performance. Many elite coaches set an end point even further back. This can vary based on your relationship with the athlete, their confidence in their technical and performance abilities, injury status, and individual needs
Evaluation of physiological fitness:	• Can the athlete get through programs with the sustained intensity of performance that you expect? • What is the weight and body composition of the athlete and what is the expected change, if any, leading up to the competition? • Is the athlete focusing on weight or appearance to the exclusion of performance? • How is this affecting their fueling, and how will that start to impact performance as the competition approaches?
Evaluation of boot health:	• Are the current boots going to make it through the competition and is there a spare set, with blades, ready to go in case of emergency? • Is the athlete going to bring the spare boots with them to the competition (it doesn't help if they're a continent away)? • Is there a reliable boot technician available at the competition?
Injury:	• Is the athlete currently injured and what is the management plan? • Are the athlete, coach, and parent all on the same page in regard to their expectations of the ability to compete with the injury • Will the injury limit or change any technical elements in the program?
Sleep	• As a coach, it is important to help athletes organize and prepare for sleep that can be affected leading up to and at competition. • Training loads typically change in both volume and intensity surrounding important competitions; there is also potentially travel (sometimes across time zones). • Both factors will contribute to physiological and psychological stress.

Less than 4 Weeks Prior to Competition	
Training continues to focus on intensity	• Volume can be high but would be lower than the heaviest training phase (typically summer)
Schedule final opportunity for critiques	• If available and on the plan
Planned discussion and rehearsal of competition logistics	• Practice six minute warm-up, more simulation of competition environment such as wearing the costume, waiting after warming up to get on and perform, skating at the same time of day as competition, getting ice time at the competition venue, if possible, etc.
Discussion with the parents about their expectations	• What are the expectations for the parents at the competition? • What are their expectations for the coaches? • How do the parents and coaches expect the athlete to behave?
Anxiety management:	• With a particular anxiety-prone athlete (or parent), it may be useful to have them create an "if-then" notebook. Example: "If my lace breaks on my six minute warm-up, then I will quickly relace my skate with the spare I keep in my skating bag."
Finalize decisions about support staff	• Who will accompany the athlete at the gate? • Will there be additional coaches/choreographers, team leaders etc. at the boards who are not typically present, and how can this potentially impact the athlete's performance
Revisit the injury status	• Is the athlete currently injured and what is the management plan? • Are the athlete, coach, and parent all on the same page in regard to their expectations of the ability to compete with the injury • Will the injury limit or change any technical elements in the program?

7 to 10 days prior to Competition	
Training tapering	• Intensity can increase, volume should decrease. • Days off during the week may need to shift depending on the upcoming travel and competition day(s) of the athlete.
Off-ice routine	• Focus on warm-up, neuromotor patterns, unloading and recovery
Plan competition nutrition routine	• Select foods that both support performance and are normal to the athlete that travel well and are stable without refrigeration, research location of hotel and rink(s) and plan for food shopping and eating, monitor athlete for restricting intake because of nerves or crash dieting
Revisit the injury status again	• Is the athlete currently injured and what is the management plan? • Is there a “drop dead” date where the athlete may choose to withdraw? • What is the injury management plan for the competition? • Contact a nearby health care provider in advance. • If the athlete is ill, does the parent or athlete have the necessary medications and the ability to replenish them on site?

Arrival at competition:	
Travel logistics	• If traveling a great distance or for many hours, how tired will the athlete be? • What is the plan for practice or other activity on the day of arrival?
Strategies for Dealing with Jet Lag	• Jet lag can influence sleep when circadian rhythms are out of sync with the clock. When traveling to competitions, it can be advantageous for both coaches and athletes to transition to the time zone as quickly as possible: • Try to transition your light/dark patterns to the destination as soon as you arrive at the airport and during travel (wear dark glasses and avoid using the overhead light, when appropriate). • Hydrate and avoid large meals in transit – try to time meals with your destination. • Avoid caffeine and maximize light exposure during daylight hours at your destination. • Do your best to stay awake until close to your normal bedtime upon arrival.
Health	• Does the athlete have a plan for staying healthy during travel (transmission of germs, eating healthy during travel)?

Practice sessions at competition:	
Practice plan	• Coaches should create a distinct plan that is communicated clearly to the athlete and parent as far as what they are expected to execute at each practice session, particularly if the coach cannot be present at the practice(s). • Remind the athlete they are there to compete, not train.
Extra practice	• Be particularly wary of parents purchasing excessive practice ice, especially out of “peer pressure.”
Program plan	• Coaches should create and communicate a general plan for each session for which program the athlete will perform, and which jumps will be included. • Will this change be depending on skate order?
The big reveal	• If the technical panel or other officials are attending practice, determine what the athlete wants the panel to see? • How can the coach best showcase the athlete’s strengths and minimize weaknesses?

Night before competition:	
Focus on routine	• Encourage the athlete to do what they normally do and have a physical, psychological, and cognitive routine worked out in advance.
Nutrition	• Encourage the athlete to eat what they normally eat, and make sure muscles are replenished with carbohydrates and with recovery nutrition within 30 minutes of training (typically consumed in a 4:1 ratio of carbohydrates to protein). Keep fat content low, as this both slows carbohydrate absorption and can cause stomach upset/feeling sluggish.
Social	• Create a plan with the athlete and parent for socializing and other distractions.
Coping with Poor Sleep/Sleep Quality at a Competition	• Even seemingly minor travel to an unfamiliar location can have an impact on an athlete's ability to obtain sufficient sleep. • Fatigue from travel, change in diet, change in training times, social interactions, and stress also impact sleep time and quality. • What can a coach do to encourage an athlete who is experiencing poor sleep surrounding a competition? • Positive messaging from coaches to athletes: • You still have the resources available to perform well. • While being sleep deprived is suboptimal, one night of no/poor sleep is unlikely to completely impair your performance.

Day of competition:	
Stay in the physical, psychological, and cognitive routine	• Avoid last minute or reactionary changes. • Emphasize the resiliency of the athlete and model it as a coach.
Behavior	• Establish some goals for your own behavior as the coach throughout the competition.
Environment	• Act to support the right environment for the athlete to be in the appropriate frame of mind (emotional regulation). • How does the parent factor into this and is the parent a positive or negative influence?
Competition day fueling	• Encourage the athlete to eat normally as much as possible and not eat anything new at the competition. • Consider when the athlete will skate and shift or delay major meals until after the competition (purchase and save food if the athlete has a late finish). • Have a variety of foods on hand that the athlete likes and has tried in training and competition before. Eating nothing on competition day is not an option! If the athlete "can't eat," fuel with fluids containing carbohydrates.
Sleep	• Consider timing of sleep (will the athlete nap and is this normal), and the need for emotional activation or relaxation. • Does the athlete need to get pumped up or calm down prior to competition?
Participation	• What other events does the athlete want to watch at the competition? • Will this impact energy level and/or nerves?
Planning time	• What is the athlete's plan for after each phase of the competition? • Are there other required activities (i.e., draw, medal ceremony) that could interfere with recovery and preparation for the next part of the competition?

Day of Competition:	
Four hours prior	This should be the last opportunity for the athlete to have a complete meal. Keep it reasonably portioned, easily digestible and carbohydrate oriented
Two hours prior	Last opportunity to consume solid foods; stick to small portions and easily to digest snacks like high-water containing fruits
One hour or less prior	Continue hydration, carbohydrates can be consumed via fruit juices or sports drinks (do what you normally do)
Immediately after competition	Recovery nutrition within 30 minutes
Throughout:	Hydrate, hydrate, hydrate

Immediately Post- Competition	
Recovery	• Have an agreed-upon physical, psychological, and cognitive plan.
Evaluate	• Select a time in advance, well outside of the heat of the competition, to evaluate competition performance **(Hint: the kiss and cry is not the time or place)**
Rest	• Have a training plan in the days to weeks following the competition supporting the seasonal plan and preparing the athlete for the next competition, if applicable.

PART 11: Conclusion

Competition readiness is a process by which an athlete and their coach prepare strategically for the figure skating season. A strong seasonal plan is the framework for the competition readiness process. Careful selection of mastery goals will support the plan and therefore the athlete's competition readiness. Creating an ideal environment for the athlete to succeed takes planning, communication, and work, and coaches who are willing to invest in tracking, analysis and comparisons data and mental training are guiding their athletes to be well on the way to a successful season. Good luck.