

# Mental Toughness—USA Basketball

Below are 15 characteristics of mentally tough players to encourage in athletes.

## **#1 - MAKES NO EXCUSES**

A mentally tough player rarely makes excuses for mistakes, for losing, for not playing well, for getting outplayed by an opponent or when things do not go their way. Instead, the mentally tough player accepts responsibility for their role in the mistake and focuses on things they can do better to make the situation or outcome better next time.

## **#2 - DEMONSTRATES CONSISTENT WORK ETHIC**

A mentally tough player works extremely hard in practice and carries that same intensity into games. Intensity & work ethic are demonstrated by a mentally tough player when the opponent is talented & it is a big game—also, when the opponent is less talented or the game is less important. A mentally tough player realizes every practice & game are important & gives their best effort.

## **#3 - IS COACHABLE**

A mentally tough player keeps eye contact with their coach when the coach is giving instruction. Mentally tough players do not roll their eyes when they do not agree with their coach, nor do they pout or shrink into self-pity when the coach gives them constructive criticism. Instead, a mentally tough player listens carefully to their coach, nods their head to show that they are listening and then works hard to try to do what the coach has asked. A mentally tough player realizes their coach is trying to make them better and they embrace opportunities to learn and improve.

## **#4 - DEMONSTRATES GRIT**

A mentally tough player knows how to find extra effort when things get tough, such as during conditional drills, a hard practice or at the end of a game when fatigued.

## **#5 - FIGHTS FOR LOOSE BALLS & TAKES CHARGES**

A mentally tough player takes pride in going after loose balls and in looking for opportunities to take a charge.

## **#6 - MAINTAINS DEFENSIVE INTENSITY**

A mentally tough player brings their "A" game on offense and defense. Mentally tough players realize they should work on their conditioning to be able to be intense on defense, as well as offense.

## **#7 - MAKES THE EXTRA PASS**

A mentally tough player makes the extra pass when a teammate is in a better position to score. It takes mental toughness to think more about the success of the team than personal statistics or glory.

## **#8 - IS NOT AFRAID TO FAIL**

A mentally tough player realizes that failure on the basketball court is a temporary frustration that must be replaced with a determination to do better. They follow a plan and become better. If a player misses a free-throw, a shot, makes a turnover, or loses a big game, the very next day that same player plans (or asks his/her coach to help create a plan) to develop new practice habits to have a greater chance of success the next time that same player is in a similar situation. The mentally tough player is not afraid of failure and so is not afraid to try new things. Failure can temporarily hurt, but mentally tough players believe that failure is an opportunity to learn, grow & improve. Mentally tough players will use failure & adversity as an opportunity to prove they are tough & can respond.

## **#9 - DOES NOT WORRY ABOUT OFFICIATING**

A mentally tough player accepts the decisions of referees and officials, even if they do not agree with the call, and they do so without rolling their eyes, acting surprised or showing frustration. After a call, a mentally tough player moves on to the next play and what will be important on that possession. A mentally tough player understands it is the coach's job to communicate with referees, not theirs.

## **#10 - CONDUCTS THEMSELVES WITH CLASS**

A mentally tough player who has won a game is respectful to opponents by shaking the opponent's hands or giving them a respectful fist bump and maybe telling them "good game" or "good luck this year," or something respectful or encouraging. A mentally tough player behaves the same way after a loss, or to a team or opponent who has not demonstrated such class. A mentally tough player does not allow themselves to sink to a lower level. They understand the difference between acceptable celebration and disrespectful celebration.

## **#11 - GOES THE EXTRA MILE**

A mentally tough player gets to practice on time and may stay late or put in extra work to improve. A mentally tough player knows that even when the coaching staff does not see the player putting in the extra work, they will eventually see the improvement.

## **#12 - LISTENS**

Listening and communication can be difficult when we are tired, frustrated or angry. A mentally tough player works to listen and communicate regardless of their state. They look people in the eye when they are talking or listening. They let someone know they have understood the information by verbalizing a quick, "ok," or "I got it," by repeating the instructions back to the coach or teammate, or by giving a respectful head nod, for example. Great listeners are patient, waiting for the other person to finish what they are saying before asking questions or making comments of their own.

## **#13 - GIVES ENCOURAGEMENT**

A mentally tough player tries to build the confidence of their teammates by encouraging them when they have made a mistake and praising them when they have made a good play. A mentally tough player never lets a good pass, good hustle play or any other good play by a teammate go without a word of encouragement or a high-five. Enthusiasm and encouragement are the foundation of great team energy. Championship teams have great enthusiasm, a culture of encouragement and great energy.

## **#14 - IS SELF-AWARE**

A mentally tough player spends a few minutes after every practice or game thinking about what they can do to play better at the next practice or game. A mentally tough player is secure enough to identify areas of improvement and will strive to write down two things they did well and three things they can do to improve. They may even compare previous post-practice and post-game analysis to see whether they can identify trends. Improvement trends can create a great improvement plan of action, and can help the athlete to set specific, relevant goals.

## **#15 - DOES NOT COMPLAIN**

A mentally tough player is more interested in winning than whining. A mentally tough player searches for the positive versus the negative, even when they feel frustrated. A mentally tough player chooses to keep the energy high and the vibe positive. This takes toughness and maturity.