

TRANSITIONAL CONTROL IN THE COMBINED-EVENT

BY

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Introduction

The combined-event – that is the decathlon for men and the heptathlon for women – is the most challenging, most demanding, most exciting and, potentially then, the most fun and most rewarding event in all of track and field! To be a combined-event athlete is to know that you are highly valued, greatly respected and genuinely appreciated. To be a combined event athlete is a great honor. To be a true combined event athlete is to be someone very, very special!

Heptathletes and decathletes have special gifts, with an unusual and highly complementary combination of speed, strength, endurance and kinesthetic capacities. Yet, they are much more than some accumulation of physical talents, capabilities and skills. Combined event athletes, and especially those who become quite successful, are very special people. They approach life and sport with energy and passion! They have a healthy level of independence, are self-motivated and self-starters! They enjoy learning, seek teaching and coaching, ask lots of questions, and are eager to “give it a try”.

These athletes find exploring and experimenting to be fun! They may have a little extra shot of “thrill seeker” and “risk taker”. They like roller coasters and fast cars! They love to share an experience, but like the center of attention. They laugh easy, and they often cry hard! They not only have multiple athletic abilities, they very often have multiple interests as well!

Combined-event athletes are very interesting people, and very fun people to be with and to share life with. While usually very challenging, and sometimes complicated and frustrating, combined event athletes are really fun to coach!

The Event

As is consistently true with most experienced coaches of combined-eventers, we view the combined-event **NOT** as a series of ten events or seven events added together, but rather as **ONE** event – the **DECATHLON** or the **HEPTATHLON**! The combined-event is one event, one over-all challenge, albeit one event with an array of multiple and varying tasks and demands covering the full spectrum of the track and field experience. But, at its essence, the combined-event is best approached and experienced as one complete whole! To some, this concept may seem trite, or trivial or overly dramatic. But, in truth, it is this most basic understanding that must inspire, guide and sustain both the coach and the athlete!

Mental

While the combined-event competition offers a severe challenge of the athlete's physical skill, strength and stamina, it is the mental challenge of the combined-event that may be the most difficult challenge of all! The wide array of events and their numerous physical demands and athletic challenges; the sheer length of the competition, spanning two days and several hours of engagement each day; responding continually to performance evaluations, processing failure and frustration as well as success and celebration; coping with climatic conditions; and, dealing with the personalities and idiosyncrasies of fellow competitors; these are just some of the more obvious aspects of the psycho-emotional challenge facing the combined-event athlete.

Without any question, how well combined-event athletes have dealt with this mental aspect of their event has determined their success or failure in many competitions! This is true in every combined-event competition that there ever has been or ever will be! This is an important issue!

Sport psychology is all about learning to “think **RIGHT** in sport”. Our thoughts and emotions have a direct impact on our performance. We can allow our thoughts and emotions to become negative and self-defeating, **OR** we can take **CONTROL** of them. We can think right and feel right, and have our thoughts and emotions add to and enhance our performance.

The key here is **TAKING CONTROL** of our thoughts and emotions. Taking control is a choice. Each coach and athlete can learn and practice the

mental skills, the cognitive control skills, that will allow them to perform at their best in competition. But, it is a choice that each individual must make.

Control is the key concept – that athletes learn to take control of critical aspects of their mental processes, and thus increase the probability that they will deliver their optimal performance and gain the greatest enjoyment, pride and satisfaction from their competitive efforts. We believe that there are four specific “controls” that are most important for the combined-event athlete. These are:

1. **Emotional Control** – Combined event athletes must practice and develop great skill in maintaining their COMPOSURE, regardless of the situation or challenge. Loss of emotional control always has a price, and usually it is a high price.
2. **Attentional Control** - Being able to control the focus of our attention is more commonly known as CONCENTRATION. To be able to control our concentration in competition, to assure that our thoughts and attention are focused on the key elements of our skill or strategy for the next successful performance – this is attentional control.
3. **Arousal Control** – Each of the events of a combined-event competition require a little different level of physical and emotional arousal from the athlete. It is critical that athletes learn to identify what levels of arousal work best for them in each event, and then learn how to get themselves to the correct level as each successive event demands. This requires a continual “coming down” after one event, maintaining a calm between events, and then “going back up” to the appropriate level (not too high, not too low) for the next event.

Transitional Control

Transitional control is not a mental skill strategy by itself, but rather a specific application of Emotional Control, Attentional Control and Arousal Control strategies to a specific aspect of the combined-event competition. One of the greatest challenges facing all combined event competitors is to effectively deal with the myriad of changing

physical, technical, psychological and emotional demands that they will confront during the course of their two days of competition.

Combined-event competitions allow for a short break period - a transition - between events (a minimum of 30 minutes, but sometimes as long as several hours in unusual circumstances), and then, of course, a break between the two days. This break period allows the athletes to make their necessary “transitions” from one event to the next. This involves such mundane issues as changing shoes and clothes, going to the bathroom and resting. But, it also regularly involves dealing with whatever emotions have resulted from the previous event, collecting one’s thoughts and shifting one’s mindset into the proper gear to approach engaging successfully in the next event. If this transition is handled well and goes smoothly, the athlete is then best readied to perform optimally. When, it is not handled well, when things are a bit out of control, disaster may be imminent.

Many things may cause threat to the athlete in making this transition to the next event. The most obvious challenge, of course, is letting go of the frustration, disappointment, anger or irrationally negative thoughts as a result of failure or poor performance in the previous event. It also may be caused by anxiety or negative thoughts regarding the upcoming event. The weather or the condition of the facilities often serve as a distracter, or looking ahead and projecting possibilities for the final point total. Sometimes, a great success or a significant breakthrough in the previous event can also serve as a serious distraction. In such cases, athletes continue in their euphoric celebration so long that they don’t leave the last event behind, don’t adequately ready themselves for the next event, and find themselves performing below their expectations. This may add the further complication of making the transition to the next event even more difficult.

Whatever the situation, whatever the circumstances, whatever the challenge, whatever the cause, the physical and emotional experience of this transitional period **CAN AND MUST BE CONTROLLED!** These times of transition must be approached proactively and not reactively. The previous event does not control the athlete’s experience during the transition time – **the ATHLETE CONTROLS the transition!**

Transitional control in the combined-event may be seen as “the event within the event”. It’s almost as if it is really the eleventh event of the decathlon or the eighth event of the heptathlon. It is in their understanding and developed

skill at performing this transitional control that the athletes “put their meet together”. It represents the athlete’s skill at managing their way through the meet. Just like all of the other skills required of the combined-event athlete, the skill of transitional control can be learned, and can be learned correctly. It is the role and responsibility of the coach to be a highly effective teacher of this critical skill.

Teaching Transitional Control

We teach our athletes the importance of this transition time. Really, we approach the transition just as if it were another event. And, we teach and work on the skills and strategies necessary to produce a great “performance” with each transition. Athletes are comfortable with the concept of routines (even rituals or habits), so we build a pre-determined routine for them to follow during the transition. We are building **Transitional Control**..

The routine is designed to provide a regular, consistent and thorough sequence for the athlete to follow during every transition within the combined-event. This routine encompasses five points of emphasis:

1. **Process** – leaving the past behind
2. **Calm** – creating a peace
3. **Strategy** - review the plan
4. **Psychomotor** - key technical cues, triggers
5. **Psycho-emotional** - “thinking Right”

Within the psycho-emotional aspect of this routine, there are four essential points to be considered every time, leading the athlete to be “thinking right” for the moment of performance in the upcoming event. These are:

1. **Arousal** - where should it be?
2. **Attention** – what am I focused on?
3. **Affirmation** – trust yourself!
4. **Activation** – DO IT!!

Here is how such a routine would be constructed.

1. **Immediate Post-event - Process – (5 - 8 minutes)**
Athlete processes and brings closure to the previous event. This can be a time for celebration, rejoicing,

pride, anger, tears, venting, or whatever fits. Coach's comments should focus on the specific point of emphasis for the previous event – the execution rather than the outcome. Find something positive to say. This is the time to put that event behind. This also is the time to go to the bathroom or to do whatever else may be needed.

2. Beginning of the Transition – Calm (5 –7 minutes)

This a quiet time, a mellow time, an alone time. (Some athletes may prefer the company of teammates or coach to being alone. Whichever, this is a time to be “free” for a few moments.) This is the opportunity for the athlete to calm their mind and relax their muscles, to bring their arousal level down, and to collect their thoughts. Music is often an easy, efficient and enjoyable mechanism to assist in this step. It is here that the athlete can effectively begin to shift to thoughts about the upcoming event. The last couple of minutes of this time could be invested in beginning to build the mindset, focus and arousal needed for the next challenge.

3. Ready for the Next Event – Strategic, Psychomotor, Psycho-emotional (15 – 20+ minutes)

Now all thoughts and emotions are focused on readying for the next event. Athlete is actively engaged in specific warm-up routines, building the appropriate level of arousal, and reviewing strategy and key performance cues and triggers. Images of the perfect performance are employed, with numerous strong personal affirmations repeated. This concentration routine ultimately leads the athlete directly to the moment of performance, where they are able to ...

See It ... Feel It ... Trust It and, then ... Do It!!
Transition complete!!

During the time between the days of the combined-event competition we suggest following a very similar routine. Process the previous event and

then the day as a whole. Move on to a time of calm, a peaceful dinner and evening of relaxation. By design, this allows the athletes a time to be “away” from the competition. After a good night’s sleep and nutritious breakfast, it’s time to begin refocusing thoughts and attention to the events and competition of the second day to come. A great warm-up leads to appropriate arousal, focused attention, affirming thoughts, an activating cue, a GREAT PERFORMANCE, which leads to the next transition ...

Conclusion

This is an example of how we approach the issue of Transitional Control with our combined-event athletes. The more experienced and mature they become, the better they control their thoughts, emotions, arousal and attention during these times of transition. And, typically, the better they perform in the combined-event.

There are relatively few opportunities for combined-event athletes to compete in any given season. Thus, it is critical for them to become highly competent at being able to “put a meet together”. They just cannot afford to leave any points ‘laying around’. There are enough variables in any competition that may take points away, things that cannot be controlled – i.e. temperature, wind, rain, officials. It is imperative, then, that athletes become the master of those variables which can be controlled.

Many athletes and coaches talk of being fully prepared, but few ever do the preparing. Transitional control, in fact, is the execution of the plan to be fully prepared. This can be controlled.

It doesn’t matter that all combined-event athletes use this model of establishing and maintaining transitional control. It just matters that they do take control. Most combined-event competitions are won or lost by how well the athletes manage their transitions. Achieving new goals, establishing new personal bests, and becoming a truly successful combined-event athlete are all influenced and determined by how competent and skilled athletes become in taking control of their transitions.

Emotional Control, Arousal Control, Attentional Control and Transitional Control – these are all examples of “thinking right in sport”.

Transitional Control – it is a choice! And, it is a critical aspect of the combined-event experience!!

(Specific examples of **Transitional Control** routines for each of the individual events in the heptathlon are provided as an appendix below. Coaches are encouraged to substitute their own specific cues, triggers and affirmations for our own. Analogous routines for the events of the decathlon are easily developed. Creativity and individual styling are encouraged. This is where the “art of coaching” can be exciting!)

Transitional Control Routines for the Heptathlon

Pre-Meet Preparation

Taper

Blow-out workouts

Technique tune-ups

Modeling

Logistical Issues - Travel

Meals, supplementation, hydration

Equipment

Check In

Support Group

Meet Day Concerns – Wake Up - literal and neuromuscular

Pre-meet diet

During meet nutritional plans

General warm up

Psycho-emotional Arousal – Moderate

The Heptathlon is ONE event!

I am a HEPTATHLETE!

I will score more!!

Let's have FUN!!!

100 Meter Hurdles

Strategy

Transition from not competing to competing.

Specific warm-up – flexibility, strides, acceleration, hurdle drills, tune-up, starts.

Psycho-emotional Arousal – Very High
Become a THROWER!
Controlled Fury!!
Go DEEP!
See It ... Feel It ... Trust It ...
Go Get It!

200 Meter Dash

Strategy Consider heat and lane assignment; timing of warm-up;
Alactic speed, acceleration, maximum velocity, starts;

Psychomotor start/acceleration – “Toe up, heel up”
curve running – “step over (the opposite knee)”
latter stages (fatigue) – “step over and grab”

Psycho-emotional Arousal – Very High
“sound releases you ... quick hands”
“I am FAST!”
See It ... Feel It ... Trust It ...
GO!

First Day – Second Day Transition

Process – warm down immediately following 200 meters; stride, jog,
walk; flexibility; hydrate and carb intake within 15
minutes of completion of 200 meters.

Review Day #1

Ice Bath, Massage, et al;

Replenish, Rejuvenate and Regenerate – physical and
emotional

Dinner

Relax

Great Sleep! (Quantity and Quality)

Wake up – literal and neuromuscular (go for walk)

Appropriate Breakfast

Check equipment

General warm up; massage;

Long Jump

Strategy	Measurements and equipment; Acceleration, maximum “controlled” velocity with accuracy! Warm up – run throughs and pop offs; Rhythm and steering; Technical lead-up activity, landings, take-offs, in air technique;
Psychomotor	Initiating the run – “push, push, push ...” “feel like a rock rolling down a hill” Take off “Grab the board” Prep for landing “Show your heels”
Psycho-emotional	Arousal - Very High “I am a Jumper!” “I love to Fly!” See It ... Feel It ... Trust It... Let’s Go Get It!

Javelin

Strategy	Warm up - Rhythm, acceleration, dynamic flexibility; Technical lead-up activities – cord pulls, weighted ball throws, power throws, 3 –5 step throws, full throws, cross overs, approaches; Prepare to “throw within self!”
Psychomotor	Withdrawal – “run away from the (throwing) hand” Impulse step – “push off ... and extend” Initiating the throw – “left arm, right leg”
Psycho-emotional	Arousal – High (similar to high jump) Aggressive with patience! “throw within self” “trust the push” “Go DEEP!”

