

Train Your Mind, Win the Match: The Power of Meditation in Volleyball

The Foundation: Why Meditation Matters on the Court

The Real Skill: The Ability to Return

It's the ability to come back to what matters, over and over, amid chaos.



Not Relaxation, But Attention Training

Meditation trains your ability to consciously direct your attention—gold when pressure spikes.



The On-Court Difference: Play Free, Not Trapped

This skill separates athletes who play freely versus those trapped by pressure.



The Mental Push-Up: How the Training Works

The Mental Push-Up

1. Focus on the Breath

Start by simply feeling the breath move in and out, without forcing anything.



2. The Mind Wanders (This is Normal!)

Your mind will drift to the match, mistakes, or school. This isn't failure—it's the training.



3. Notice & Return

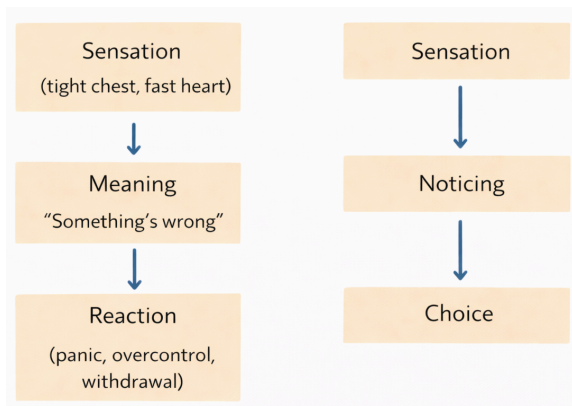
Gently notice you've wandered, name it ("thinking"), and guide your attention back.

Chapter 8 – Meditation: Training the Ability to Return



The gym settles into an expectant hush—a kind of stillness that feels like the air before serve receive. Gary and Kara step aside, and Leo walks to the center line. He doesn't stand like a lecturer—he stands like someone who's played this game inside and out, and knows what's at stake if you never learn this skill.

He lets the silence stretch, meeting the athletes' eyes. "Most athletes never get taught this. They spend years chasing confidence, fighting nerves, thinking something's wrong with them when the game goes sideways. But I've seen it at every level—what really decides a match isn't just talent or tactics. It's this skill: can you come back, over and over, to what matters, even in chaos? That's what meditation builds. Most athletes think they need to feel ready before they can perform. Meditation teaches the opposite: you learn to perform without waiting for your internal state to be perfect."



Leo's voice is gentle but precise, words echoing in the quiet gym. "You've learned the five capacities—emotion, attention, cognition, interoception, behavior. You know how they rise and fall, how they support you or trip you. Meditation is the training ground for all of them. It is not an add-on. It is the foundation. And it's the difference between playing free and playing trapped when the heat is on."

He walks a slow semicircle, as if feeling the shape of the room. "When I learned meditation, nobody called it 'relaxation.' It wasn't about stress relief or even mindfulness. It was a way to understand the world inside me more clearly, instead of being dragged around by it. And in competition, that's everything."

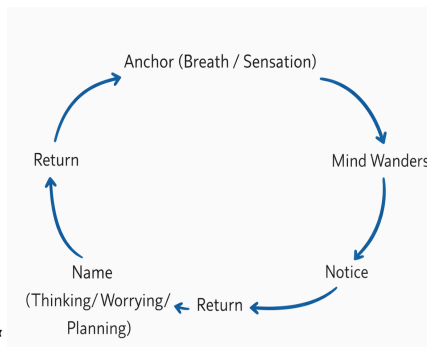
A small smile flickers. "And when I started teaching meditation to Olympic athletes, to top Division I programs, to people under pressure way beyond the court, I saw the same truth: those who train their minds win a different game."

He gestures toward the Enso Wave painted on the wall. "That symbol means something to me—a circle that's not closed, a wave that never peaks the same way twice. It reminds me that awareness is never perfect, never finished. But it's always available. You meet yourself where you are and train from there."

Leo eases onto a low bench. “You’ve heard that meditation is about the breath. That’s true, but it’s just the doorway. What meditation really trains is your ability to consciously direct your attention—no matter what is happening inside or around you. That’s gold when the pressure spikes.”

He lifts a hand, showing the slow movement of breath. “When you sit, you feel the breath move in and know you’re breathing in. You feel the breath move out and know you’re breathing out. Nothing forced. The breath breathes itself.”

He pauses, scanning the faces in front of him. “Always—always—the mind wanders. It thinks about school, a match, a mistake, a conversation, dinner, nothing at all. In fact, picture this: It’s match point. Your chest is tight, your mind is racing, your body’s one surge away from freezing or flying. What you do next isn’t about talent—it’s about whether you can direct your attention, right now, on purpose. That’s what this practice is. That wandering? It isn’t failure. It’s the training.”



“ If you looked at this on paper, it would just be a simple loop: focus, wander, notice, return. That’s it. That loop is the training.”

A gentle tap to his temple. “Meditation is simple, not easy. You focus on something—usually the breath. Your mind wanders—always. You notice it. You name it—‘thinking,’ ‘worrying,’ ‘planning,’ ‘doubting’—without judgment. And then you return. That’s the loop. Every time you return, you’re building the muscle that lets you choose where your attention goes—here, and in the heat of a match. That return is the mental push-up. The bicep curl for your attention. The reset that rewires your system.”

His voice drops into something warm and grounding. “In meditation, you watch thoughts appear and pass. Emotions rise and fall. Sensations surface and dissolve. You start to understand—deep down—that none of it needs to control you.”

He looks out across the gym. “Meditation changes how an athlete relates to what’s happening inside—often in ways no one else can see, but that show up when pressure hits. Meditation doesn’t remove pressure—it creates the space where choice becomes possible again.”



He lets the athletes sit with that. “Because emotion steadies, attention steadies. Because attention steadies, thought clarifies. Because thought clarifies, the body softens. And because the body softens, your behavior becomes intentional—not reactive.”

“All of this happens because meditation teaches you one skill above all: the ability to return. Over and over. Breath after breath. Moment after moment. You return. Over time, this ability to return—again and again, under pressure—is one of the quiet differences you see in athletes who stay steady when things get loud.” He nods at the Enso Wave again. “Meditation teaches you to ride the swell—not fear it.”

He claps softly. “Alright. Let’s practice. Not for perfection. Not to ‘clear your mind.’ Just to see the mind clearly. Meditation trains awareness. The skills train response. Together, they let you move through pressure instead of being moved by it.”

The athletes settle in, some cross-legged, some on benches, everyone breathing.

“You can’t do this wrong,” Leo says. “There is no wrong. There is only noticing... and returning.”

Guided Meditation — Led by Leo

(0:00–0:20)

“Find a comfortable seat on the floor or the bench. Let your spine rise—not stiff, just awake. Let your shoulders soften. Let your hands rest easily. Take one breath in... and let it out.”

(0:20–0:45)

“Feel the ground beneath you. Feel how the body holds itself without you needing to force anything. Let the jaw loosen. Let the space behind your eyes soften.”

(0:45–1:15)

“Now bring your awareness to the breath. Not changing it. Not improving it. Just feeling it. The breath knows how to breathe. You are simply watching.”

(1:15–1:45)

“Breathing in... know you’re breathing in.
Breathing out... know you’re breathing out.”

(1:45–2:30)

“The mind will wander. That is its nature. You might think about school... a match... a mistake... a person... nothing at all. When you notice you’ve wandered, gently return to the breath. No scolding. No judgment. Returning is the training.”

(2:30–3:15)

“Now open to sensations. Notice any warmth, tightness, pressure, fluttering, or ease. See if you can let the sensation be just sensation—not danger, not meaning, not prediction. Just sensation arising and passing.”

(3:15–4:00)

“Open further. Notice sounds—the hum of lights, a ball bouncing in another gym, someone shifting. Sounds arise... and fade... all inside awareness.”

(4:00–5:00)

“Thoughts return. Emotions return. Let them come. Let them go. Like waves rising and dissolving. You are the space they move in.”

(5:00–5:30)

“Now return to the breath one last time. Feel the inhale. Feel the exhale. Feel the steadiness beneath it all.”

(5:30–6:00)

“When you’re ready... lift your eyes.
You’ve just trained the system that holds you under pressure.”

When the practice ends, Leo’s voice brings the group back. “Meditation gave you the foundation—how to notice your system, return to the moment, and ride the wave without being pulled under. But awareness is just the beginning. Now it’s time to build on it.”

He looks around. “The skills ahead—STOP, Mindfulness Reset, Radical Acceptance, Optimism, Rumination Recovery, Connection—aren’t just ideas to memorize. They’re actions you’ll use in the middle of a match, in the middle of pressure, in the middle of being human. Each one is designed to steady a different part of your system: your emotions, your attention, your thoughts, your body signals, your behavior.”

He smiles, voice charged with quiet excitement. “In these next chapters, you won’t just read about the skills—you’ll learn them directly. You’ll see why each one works, when to use it, and how to practice it. These aren’t tricks. They’re trainable responses that let you perform with clarity, consistency, and confidence—even when the match gets sharp.”

He nods, and the gym feels ready for something new. “This is a skill that gives you access to freedom in your play—especially when pressure would normally take it away. This is where the mental game becomes a real part of your volleyball. And it starts now.”

