

How mental toughness gives athletes the edge

By Rachel Jacqueline, Life

At a sudden-death play-off for first place in the World University Championships of golf earlier this year, Hong Kong amateur Tiffany Chan was staring defeat in the face. Watching her competitor sink a difficult putt, she knew she had to match her rival.

After four rounds of play, the two golfers were tied at 10-under-par 278 – and they had wowed the crowds, hole for hole. It all came down to a single shot. Chan took a deep breath, focused and holed a three-meter birdie putt for the win.

“I just told myself to keep calm, take one shot at a time and focus on the present moment,” says the 20-year-old Tuen Mun resident. “I had to be tough – I had only one chance and I had worked hard for it.”

Chan’s fortitude in a moment of immense pressure is known in sports psychology as “mental toughness”. A term championed by sports psychologist James Loehr in the early 1990s, mental toughness has since been recognized as the “X-factor” that gives winning athletes the edge over their competitors.

Despite its significance, health professionals and athletes still struggle to determine what being “mentally tough” means. “Mental toughness is a combination of a few traits like resilience and stoicism. It’s about finding the opportunity in everything,” says Laura Walsh, mental health counselor and applied sports psychologist at LifeShift Hong Kong.

Walsh has first-hand knowledge of what being mentally tough requires. She competes in triathlons and international adventure races, which are multi-day events covering 350

kilometers of mountain biking, kayaking, rope work, running and trekking.

Competing in the Canadian team during the Moroccan Eco-Challenge in 1999, she recalls being on the verge of physical and mental exhaustion from sleep deprivation and altitude sickness. “My stomach felt like it was in my knees and my eyeballs felt like they were being sucked back into my head because my head hurt so much. I was done.”

Yet, she found the courage to continue. “After minutes of blubbering, I stood up and just started to put one foot in front of the other.” The team finished seventh.

The “plough factor” Walsh speaks of – continuing regardless of physical discomfort – resonates with endurance swimmer Simon Holliday, who swam 35km last May, from Hong Kong to Macau, to raise awareness of plastics in the ocean. He completed the swim in a record 10 hours, 20 minutes, and 30 seconds.

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