
When competing in World Class level competition, technical experience and ability between competitors is often times very close. Competitors must try to gain any advantage they can through training programs, diet and weight cutting, and mental preparation. When everything else is even, a slight weight advantage, and the mental toughness it takes to achieve that advantage, can mean the difference between a step forward or backward in the competitor's career. Below, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu black belt, Abu Dhabi veteran, multiple time IBJJF World medalist, 2 time NCWA wrestling All-American, and FILA World Champion, Jayson Patino, reveals some of his tried and true secrets to preparing for competition.

COMPETITION PREPARATION

by Jayson Patino

This guide is meant for anyone wanting to elevate their training to a higher level. These tips can help you prepare for any competition but they work especially well for combat sports that require you to weigh in at a specific weight class (i.e. MMA, Jiu-Jitsu, Muay Thai, Wrestling, Boxing, etc). Combat sports are individual sports so they are very different from team sports like basketball and soccer because your success relies solely on your work ethic. To be successful you not only have to learn the technical aspects of your sport along with strength and conditioning but you also have to be knowledgeable in nutrition and dieting, mental preparation and cutting water weight.

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The main objectives for any competitor should be to:

1. Improve technical strengths and weaknesses
2. Increase strength and cardio
3. Compete at a weight class requiring a low body fat percentage while still performing at full potential.
4. Be as confident and mentally strong as possible.
5. Plan, practice, and execute a strategic game plan.

Several steps must be taken in order to begin losing fat while improving your cardio and gaining strength. It is important to view your body as a high performance machine. Training, eating and resting properly are all essential to you performing at your full potential. Self-discipline and dedication are crucial to following through with these programs. When planning out your training camp for a competition you must write out a weekly training schedule (program) that will detail what days you spar/grapple, do conditioning, practice technique and rest. Try to train six days a week and ALWAYS give yourself one day to rest. Planning out your daily meals is also essential to following through with the strict diet plan that will get you to your competition weight. Eliminate any stress or distractions that may deter you from following through with your goals. Being mentally prepared is just as important as any other aspect of your training.

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To simplify this process, I have separated the main areas of focus into three different groups: **training, mental preparation, and losing water weight**. Training will describe anything related to strength and conditioning workouts, programming, controlling your breathing and heart rate, and rest. Mental preparation will go through the important steps to show up to competition confident and mentally unbreakable. Losing water weight will walk you through the proper way to lose water weight and successfully make weight without feeling drained. Other important aspects of competing are dieting and technique. I wrote a different article on dieting for competition which details the proper way to lower body fat while keeping high energy during your training sessions. To efficiently improve your technique, I’ve written the article “Mastering Jiu-Jitsu One Move at a Time.” You can find links to both those articles at the end of this one.

Training

As mentioned earlier, the goal when planning out your training schedule is to plan for six days of physical training and one day of rest. While developing your training program be sure to find a balance between strength and conditioning workouts and live sparring (I will use the term sparring to describe any hard or “live” training session, regardless of whether it is grappling, striking or MMA training). Strength and conditioning workouts (anything meant to improve cardiovascular fitness, strength, endurance, explosiveness, etc.) should be done at least 2 to 3 times a week in addition to 3 or 4 sparring sessions. Try to schedule your conditioning workouts on opposite days that you spar to avoid getting burnt out or injured. If you do two hard workouts in one day (2-a-day) at the very least give yourself a few hours in between training sessions to recover. Be careful sparring everyday which can often lead to injuries. Drilling and practicing technique regularly will continuously improve your technique and eliminate weaknesses in your game. Incorporate drilling sessions as a second workout of the day or as a 20 to 30 minute warm-up before sparring.

Two of the best ways to improve your conditioning are circuit training and sprints. Circuit training (also referred to as HIIT High Intensity Interval Training) is a series of high intensity resistance training exercises separated by short rest periods. Circuits will build strength and muscle endurance. Alternating between high intensity exercises and short rest periods causes your heart rate to constantly go up and down; Mimicking the way your heart rate constantly increases and decreases during a competition or sparring session.

Learning to control your breathing and in turn lower your heart rate during the rest periods will transfer over to staying calm during competition. I like to practice breathing in deep through my nose and slowly exhaling through my mouth. Repeat this as many times as you can until it is time to move on to the next circuit. When planning out a circuit workout write down several exercises that focus on different muscle groups and if possible, use movements or exercises specific to your sport. This will increase your stamina and endurance throughout all the muscle groups that are used during a competition. While doing the exercises go as fast as you can while always using good technique.

A basic example of a circuit workout using only your body weight could be:

0:45 Push-ups
0:15 Rest
0:45 Squat jumps
0:15 Rest
0:45 Bicycle crunches
0:15 Rest
0:45 Burpees
0:15 Rest
0:45 Jump rope (sprinting)

After completing the circuit, rest for 2 minutes then repeat everything. As your conditioning improves, you can go through the circuit 3 or 4 times, changing the exercises as you go. You can also shorten or extend the workout and/or rest times depending on your conditioning level. When using weights, cables or bands there are endless possibilities for different circuits. You can also switch between days where you lift with heavier weights and days where you lift lighter weights and increase the number of repetitions. As you get closer to competition you would decrease the number of heavy lifting days and increase the number of lighter lifting days. True strength gains should be made outside of training camps. During a training camp you should focus on increasing cardio/stamina using lighter weights.

Sprints are also great for this style of high intensity interval training and are better for your conditioning than running long, slow distances. Learning to control your breathing (and hence your heart rate) after each sprint will also transfer over to controlling your breathing in training and competition. I like to do my sprint workouts by alternating between sprinting 50 yards, then jogging 50 yards slowly. Repeat this 10 to 15

times to start. As your conditioning improves, increase the number of sprints you do. As this becomes easier, increase the distance you are sprinting and shorten the distance you jog.

You can also do other exercises like swimming, rowing, stationary bike or elliptical machines in the high intensity-style workout. It is important to incorporate exercises that work explosiveness and power, not only strength. These high intensity style exercises will not only get your body in peak physical condition but they also increase your metabolism. Your body needs more energy to recover after such an intense workout so your metabolism continues working hard long after you're done working out.

If you are constantly feeling tired, hurt, or without energy, you may be over training. Your diet plays a major role in your energy levels but overtraining can cause you to have trouble sleeping, increased anxiety, and feeling lethargic. Make sure you are resting and sleeping properly and keep your stress levels as low as possible. When you are pushing your body this hard your immune system is more likely to break down if you are not properly rested. Getting sick will delay your progress and set back your training. Be sure to take a multi-vitamin daily as well as additional Vitamin C if you find yourself getting sick more often than usual.

Mental Preparation

Being mentally strong is one the most important traits a competitor can possess. Having confidence, belief in your abilities, and the ability to push through difficult situations can often times be the difference between winning and losing. You need to have the ability to perform to your full potential and not be affected by pressure or stressful situations. Being “clutch” and not “choking” when the match is on the line. This is the most neglected trait amongst competitors, despite being the most important.

Two very important tools I use to get mentally prepared for competition are Positive Reaffirmation Statements (Declaratives) and Visualization Drills. A Positive Reaffirmation Statement is basically just repeating positive statements about yourself to raise your self-confidence. The statements should be personalized to you and your strengths. An example of one I use is:

I am stronger than my opponent.

I am faster than my opponent.

I am more technical than my opponent.

I am in better shape than my opponent.

I have worked harder than my opponent.

I will not lose but instead will work through and beat my opponent.

Add or remove whatever statements pertain to you and repeat them several times leading into your competition. Look in the mirror while repeating them and say them with confidence. You must believe them to be true for them to work. This may seem silly at first but there is no substitute for confidence and this drill can improve yours drastically.

Visualization Drills are the practice of visualizing yourself competing and succeeding. These type of drills are used by elite level athletes in every sport. The goal is to see yourself succeeding in the competition as many times as possible, before the actual competition. This serves as a form of muscle memory (or mental memory I suppose) to help overcome the anxiety and nerves that come with competing. It's natural to feel nervous when you compete. Don't fight these feelings, embrace them.

Actual competition experience is so invaluable because once you've competed enough times, you don't really get as nervous. This is what we are trying to accomplish with the visualization drills. Put your mind in that competition enough times to where you feel as if you've been there so many times and seen yourself win. This helps subside the nerves and build confidence. We want to minimize the gap between your potential and your actual performance. Have you ever heard of how fighters who make their UFC debut underperform under the bright lights? This is caused by the shock and nerves of competing on the big stage with so many people watching. Those fighters that underperform didn't get technically worse. They often let their emotions take control and the nerves don't let them perform to their full potential as they have so many times before. This is what we want to avoid.

To begin your visualization drill, sit down in a quiet, comfortable place where no one will disturb you. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Think in detail about the day of competition starting with when you first wake up. Visualize yourself eating breakfast, driving to the venue, warming up, etc. See yourself walking into the cage or on the mat and standing across from your opponent. Picture yourself executing your game plan and performing as planned. At some point though, you must see yourself caught in a bad situation where you have to work through and prevail. At the end of the visualization, you overcome the adversity and finish victorious. Play out several different scenarios, each with a positive ending. This will help condition your mind and make you more comfortable when the day of competition actually comes. If you're training for a tournament with multiple matches in a day, visualize all of the potential matches, (first match, quarterfinals, semi-finals, & finals) and not just one match. After each match see your hand getting raised. See yourself at the top of the first place podium with the second and third place finishers beneath you.

These mental preparation drills are designed to build your confidence so you enter a competition with no doubt that you will succeed. You have to believe that you will be champion. Believe that you can beat any opponent. Once you believe this, you don't need to worry about the brackets; who you will face first or last; how strong your

opponent is, or what they might do. With the proper conditioning done, you don't need to worry about pacing yourself or "cruising" during your competition (although this may seem harmless, you are most vulnerable while going easy during a hard match). You must match and exceed your opponent's intensity to constantly keep the pressure on them. Do not let them rest- EVER. Every competition is a battle of attrition. A battle of will. Who will break first? That is decided before the fight even starts. Training is the hard part. Competing is easy.

A few years ago at the No-Gi World Championships held in Long Beach, California I had the honor of sitting down and speaking with 9x World Champion Rubens "Cobrinha" Charles. I was interested in finding out what his regime was for mental preparation before competitions. This was two weeks after he upset Rafael Mendes to win the ADCC Submission Fighting Championships in China. Upon asking him how he mentally prepares for competition, his response was immediate and began with "I do A LOT of visualization drills... I get in front of the mirror and I talk to myself... I see myself winning..." For some reason I expected him to tell me some kind of secret formula for winning. Instead, I got reaffirmation that what I have been doing and preaching for years is correct. That visualizing and believing in yourself winning is just as important as actually going out there and winning. This was a very satisfying moment for me as an instructor and competitor.

Losing Water Weight

Two days before your weigh-in you should be within 5-15 pounds of your weight class depending on how much time you have between weigh-in and competition. These final pounds should be lost by "floating" (not eating or drinking almost anything and allowing your body to naturally empty its' bowels) and sweating out water weight. If you are weighing in immediately before competing, like in IBJJF tournaments, keep the water weight loss minimal (2-5 lbs). If the weigh-in is on the same day as competition but a few hours before, you should try to limit your water weight loss to only a few pounds (5-7 lbs). If your weigh-in is the day before competition, you can cut more water weight (8-15 lbs) because you have more time to rehydrate. These numbers can vary depending on how much you weigh and your body fat percentage. Be careful not to cut too much weight too close to competition. Failure to properly rehydrate after cutting a lot of water weight can result in severe cramping and lethargy and adversely affect your performance. You should plan to diet and be at a set weight before beginning your water restriction to avoid cutting too much weight at the last minute.

There are several ways to lose water weight, some easier than others. My preferred method is the bath tub. I fill a bath tub with water as hot as I can stand and mix in about one to two pounds of Epsom salt. I put Albolone (it is sold as a make-up remover but works by opening up your pores and hence making you sweat more) or

Sweet Sweat (similar to Albolene but sold specifically for sweating more) all over my body. I lay in the bath tub for about 20-30 minutes alternating between by upper body and lower body being in the water. I lose around 3-5 pounds with every session. Listening to music or putting on a movie helps distract your mind from the heat.

Going into a sauna while wearing a sauna suit is a very popular method of losing water weight. I used this method for years before discovering the bath tub. The key here is to expend the least amount of energy and sweat the most. You want to avoid running several miles or any hard workout that may deplete your body this close to competition. I would always put Albolene on and a couple sweaters and sweat pants on over the sauna suit. Then begin by doing just enough of a light exercise (like jumping jacks, sprawls, burpees, etc.) to break a sweat and go into the sauna for 5-10 minute intervals. I would sit down and rock back and forth a lot to keep my sweat going (very easy and requires almost no effort). Once you feel that you've stopped sweating, do a few more exercises to get it going again and continue entering the sauna.

The biggest deciding factor in whether or not someone will follow through with their training schedule and diet plan is motivation. If you are not motivated to follow through with these programs you're much more likely to quit. What motivates you? Why do you want to get in better shape? Why do you want to lose fat? My motivation was always competition. I wanted to be the best that I could be in wrestling, MMA and jiu-jitsu. I want to be a World Champion. If you're motivation is not a competition then you have to be working towards a goal. Set a realistic short term and long term goal and decide how important it is for you to reach them (from 1 to 10?). If it is very important for you to reach that goal then you're much more likely to follow through with these programs. If the level of importance is a 5 you're more likely to quit because it is very hard to follow through with the strict training and diet regimens.

Do not let anything deter you from accomplishing your goals. This will help build self-discipline and mental strength. With mental strength you can achieve anything. Your mind is your most powerful weapon. But it can also be your worst enemy if you do not learn to control it. Practice your Positive Self Reaffirmation Statements and Visualization Drills regularly. This will help build your self-confidence. With self-confidence and a high self esteem you will believe that achieving your goals is possible.

Mental toughness and self-discipline are crucial to sticking to a strict diet and hard training regimen. The great thing about a well planned out training camp is that you have to train harder, do more cardio and eat right to get your weight down. In addition to getting leaner, this added cardio will get you in better shape leading up to your competition. Being in better shape will give you more confidence in your ability to outwork your opponent. Now, mentally stronger, leaner, in better shape and at a lower weight class, you can perform at your full potential.

*Cutting weight for competition is **not** a cookie-cutter type process. Everyone is different and the process through which you cut weight may differ from what I do and may change depending on your overall physical condition.*

ANY WEIGHT CUT SHOULD BE DONE IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE APPROVAL OF YOUR PRIMARY PHYSICIAN OR OTHER QUALIFIED MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL.

Example of my Weekly Training Schedule

Monday

2:00-3:30pm: No-Gi grappling/Sparing live training session

7:00-8:00pm: Drill Brazilian Jiu Jitsu technique. Light grappling.

Tuesday

11:00am-12:00pm: Gi grappling live

Wednesday

1:00-2:00pm: Circuit training/Conditioning

8:00-9:00pm: Drill Brazilian Jiu Jitsu technique. Light grappling.

Thursday

11:00am-12:00pm: Gi grappling live

Friday

12:00-1:00pm: Circuit training/Conditioning

2:00-3:00pm: No-Gi grappling/Sparing live training session.

Saturday

12:00-1:00pm: Sprints, 200 push-ups, 100 pull ups, Ab workout.

Sunday

Rest

USEFUL LINKS:

Jiu-Jitsu Specific Strength and Conditioning

<http://mmaorlando.com/2016/09/12/jiu-jitsu-specific-strength-conditioning/>

Characteristics of a Champion

<http://www.mmaorlando.com/2018/01/29/characteristics-of-a-champion/>

Mastering Jiu-Jitsu One Move at a Time

<http://www.mmaorlando.com/2018/02/01/mastering-jiu-jitsu-one-move-at-a-time/>