

# MBAT Practitioner Guide

Mindfulness-Based Attention Training — 28-day protocol for coaches and athletes. The science, the structure, and the daily practice instructions.

## FOUNDATION

### What MBAT Is and Why It Exists

Most mindfulness programs sold to athletes are generic stress reduction protocols dressed in sport language. MBAT is different — it was designed from the ground up to train attentional capacity using a specific scientific model (Nideffer's attention matrix) and an evidence-based minimum dose (Jha's research with military cohorts).

The Gucciardi definition of mental toughness — the ability to pay attention to the right thing, at the right time, regardless of circumstances — identifies three things that must be trained: knowing which attentional mode the situation requires, being able to shift between modes, and maintaining that capacity under pressure. MBAT trains all three. Each week targets a specific attentional quadrant. The four-week progression is the systematic tour of the attentional map.

#### THE EVIDENCE BASE

Jha et al. (2015) established the minimum effective dose: 12 minutes per day, five days per week, four or more weeks. This produced significant improvements in attentional stability and working memory in military cohorts. The MBAT protocol uses 15 minutes daily for 28 consecutive days — above the minimum dose, with a four-week quadrant progression not in the original research but grounded in Nideffer's model.

## STRUCTURE

### The Nideffer Map — 4-Week Quadrant Progression

	EXTERNAL	INTERNAL
BROAD	Broad External (Assess) Read game · scan environment · multiple inputs <i>Week 3 — Open Monitoring</i>	Broad Internal (Analyze) Plan · strategize · connect mental models <i>Week 4 — Connection Practice</i>
NARROW	Narrow External (Perform) Lock to target · execute · automaticity online <i>Week 1 — Focused Attention</i>	Narrow Internal (Rehearse) Single cue · breath · body check · imagery <i>Week 2 — Body Scan</i>

## PROTOCOL

## Universal Practice Parameters

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<b>TIME</b>	15 minutes. Non-negotiable. Not 12, not 20. The research dose matters.
<b>FREQUENCY</b>	Daily. Missing days is normal — the instruction is always to resume without self-criticism. Missing more than two consecutive days significantly diminishes the training effect.
<b>POSTURE</b>	Seated upright with spine supported. Lying down is acceptable if seated is not possible, but increases likelihood of sleep.
<b>SPACE</b>	Quiet if possible. The practice progressively builds capacity to maintain attention in non-quiet environments — but start with minimal distraction.
<b>TIMING</b>	Same time each day produces stronger habit formation. Most practitioners report morning as most sustainable.
<b>DISTRACTION</b>	Mind wandering is not failure. It is the practice. Every time attention wanders and returns, that is a successful attentional repetition. This is the single most important thing to teach athletes.

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## 28-DAY PROTOCOL

## Week-by-Week Practice Instructions

<b>WEEK 1</b>	<b>Focused Attention — Narrow External</b>
<b>ATTENTIONAL QUADRANT</b>	Narrow External
<b>MODE</b>	A single external sensation (breath at nostrils or chest) as the anchor. Narrow because there is one point of focus. External because the object is a bodily sensation rather than a thought or mental image.
<b>SESSION STRUCTURE</b>	0–2 min: settle and set intention · 2–13 min: breath focus with return on distraction · 13–15 min: brief open awareness, release intention
<b>DAYS</b>	Days 1–7

**Daily Practice Instruction**

Find your breath. You can feel it at your nostrils — the slight cool air moving in, the slightly warmer air moving out. Or at your chest — the subtle rise and fall. Choose one and stay there. When your mind wanders to a thought, a sound, a feeling — and it will — gently return to the breath. No judgment about the wandering. Just return. The return is the practice. Do this for 15 minutes.

**What to Expect**

Week 1 is often frustrating. Athletes who expect relaxation or emptiness find neither. The mind is busy, restless, and highly aware of itself. This is accurate — they are seeing their mind clearly for the first time, not failing at practice. Improvement in Week 1 looks like shorter gaps between wandering and returning, slightly less self-judgment about the wandering. Not fewer distracting thoughts.

**TEACHING NOTE**

The single most important reframe for athletes in Week 1: distraction is not failure. Every time attention wanders and returns is a successful repetition. A workout has sets and reps. Each wandering-and-return cycle is one attentional rep. The mind that wanders frequently in Week 1 is getting a very high-rep workout.

## WEEK 2

## Body Scan — Narrow Internal

<b>ATTENTIONAL QUADRANT</b>	Narrow Internal
<b>NIDEFER MODE</b>	Systematic internal attention, moving through one body region at a time. Narrow because focus stays on one region before moving. Internal because the objects of attention are body sensations rather than external inputs.
<b>SESSION STRUCTURE</b>	0–1 min: settle at breath · 1–13 min: systematic body scan, region by region · 13–15 min: return to breath and release
<b>DAYS</b>	Days 8–14

**Daily Practice Instruction**

Begin at your feet. Notice what is there — warmth, pressure, tingling, nothing. Label what you find: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Don't try to change it. Accept it. Move on to the next region. Spend about 90 seconds at each: lower legs, upper legs, hips, lower back, torso, upper back, shoulders, neck, jaw, forehead. Move at a pace where you can actually feel something before you leave — not a race through the body. When attention wanders, return to the region you were at and continue.

**What to Expect**

Week 2 is often more frustrating than Week 1. The body scan is harder than breath focus because the object is less crisp. Some body regions will produce strong sensations (old injuries, tension, chronic discomfort); others will seem to produce nothing. Both are correct. The instruction is to notice and label what is there, not to produce sensation. The label — pleasant, unpleasant, neutral — is the practice. Accept without trying to change, and move on.

**TEACHING NOTE**

Athletes with injury history often encounter complicated experiences in the Body Scan — scanning through an injury site can produce strong emotional responses. This is not a problem to solve. The instruction remains: notice, label, accept, move on. If an athlete raises concern about this experience, it is useful material for an ACT conversation about acceptance. This is also the week to introduce the transfer framing: the label/accept/move-on discipline is the same capacity that allows an athlete to feel fear in competition and keep performing anyway.

## WEEK 3

## Open Monitoring — Broad External

<b>ATTENTIONAL QUADRANT</b>	Broad External
<b>NIDEFFER MODE</b>	Wide, open awareness of the full stream of environmental inputs without narrowing to any single object. Broad because the field is expansive. External because the objects come from the environment, not internal experience.
<b>SESSION STRUCTURE</b>	0–2 min: settle at breath to anchor · 2–13 min: open monitoring — sounds, light, temperature, spatial awareness · 13–15 min: return to breath
<b>DAYS</b>	Days 15–21

**Daily Practice Instruction**

Let your attention expand outward. Notice sounds — not the stories the sounds trigger, just the sounds themselves. Notice light and shadow, temperature, the sense of space around you. When something grabs your attention and pulls you into thought, notice that it grabbed you, and return to the open field. No single object. Everything and nothing in particular. If your attention narrows, gently reopen it. The field is the practice.

**What to Expect**

Week 3 is where many athletes first feel something they recognize as useful. The Broad External mode is closer to game-state awareness than the first two practices, and athletes begin making the connection between this practice and reading plays, scanning the field, and situational awareness. This recognition is the beginning of transfer. Encourage athletes to name specific performance situations where this mode would apply.

**TEACHING NOTE**

The hardest instruction in Week 3 is "no grabbing." Athletes understand staying present with breath. They do not always understand not following environmental inputs that arise. The distinction: noticing a sound vs. following the thought the sound triggers. The practice trains the former. When an athlete reports they kept getting distracted by sounds in Week 3, gently point out that sounds are the object of practice this week — the question is whether they followed the story the sound triggered.

## WEEK 4

## Connection Practice — Broad Internal

<b>ATTENTIONAL QUADRANT</b>	Broad Internal
<b>NIDEFER MODE</b>	Wide internal field of awareness held toward self and others with acceptance and equanimity. Broad because the field is expansive and includes others. Internal because the object is an emotional and relational state rather than external inputs.
<b>SESSION STRUCTURE</b>	0–2 min: settle at breath · 2–13 min: connection practice — self, then close others, then difficult others · 13–15 min: release and return
<b>DAYS</b>	Days 22–28

**Daily Practice Instruction**

Begin with yourself. Notice what is present: ease, tension, warmth, resistance — whatever is actually there. Label it: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Accept it. Move on. Then extend attention to someone you care about. Notice what arises. Label it. Accept it. Move on. Then someone neutral. Then someone you find difficult. At each, the discipline is the same: notice what is actually present, label it, accept it without trying to change it, and move on. You are not trying to generate feelings that are not there. You are meeting what is there with clear, accepting attention.

**What to Expect**

Week 4 is where the label/accept/move-on discipline the body scan introduced becomes most challenging — and most clearly performance-relevant. The body scan trained this capacity on physical sensation. The Connection Practice extends it to emotional and relational experience. What was true for physical discomfort is equally true for psychological discomfort: the capacity to notice, label, accept without trying to change, and continue is exactly what "regardless of circumstances" means in competition.

**TEACHING NOTE**

The Integration Note: by Day 28, athletes should have a 15-minute daily window that is genuinely theirs. The autonomy-supportive move at Day 28 is explicit — the program shifts from "do the practice" to "you now own this space." The container belongs to the athlete. What they put in it — continued MBAT, values reflection, PPL rehearsal, Plan B imagery — is their choice. This transfer of ownership is when MBAT stops being an assignment and starts being a ritual.

TEACHING GUIDE

## Teaching MBAT — What Coaches Need to Know

**YOU CANNOT TEACH WHAT YOU HAVE NOT DONE**

The MBAT practitioner requirement in the certification — completing all 28 days as part of the coursework — is not administrative. A coach who has not done the practice cannot authentically answer the questions athletes ask in Week 1, cannot normalize the frustration of Week 2, and cannot recognize Week 3 transfer moments when they occur. The embodied knowledge is irreplaceable.

Framing by Week

- BEFORE WEEK 1**      "Your mind will wander constantly. That is not failure. That is the practice. Every return is a successful rep."
- BEFORE WEEK 2**      "This week will feel harder than Week 1. The object is less crisp. That difficulty is normal and productive."
- BEFORE WEEK 3**      "This week you may first feel something you recognize from your sport — the wide-field awareness you access in game situations."
- BEFORE WEEK 4**      "This week the practice moves to emotional and relational experience. The same discipline applies: notice, label, accept, move on. It will be harder. That's why we saved it for last."

SUMMARY

## 28-Day Program at a Glance

1 (Days 1–7)	Focused Attention	Narrow External	Outward	Single-point focus and return
2 (Days 8–14)	Body Scan	Narrow Internal	Inward	Internal attentional precision · label/accept/move-on
3 (Days 15–21)	Open Monitoring	Broad External	Outward	Expansive field readiness · no grabbing
4 (Days 22–28)	Connection Practice	Broad Internal	Inward	Relational/affective acceptance · full attentional range

Total: 28 sessions × 15 minutes = 7 hours of direct attentional training. Minimum effective dose met. Nideffer map complete. Container established.