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## The Role of sports psychology to enhance sport performance

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### Abstract

Psychology is the study of the nature and function of the mind, with particular emphasis placed on the relationship between thought and physical action. Psychology has become increasingly important in sports, particularly with respect to the improvement and maintenance of athletic performance.

Sport psychology has grown remarkably from its roots in the amorphous and poorly understood disciplines of athlete motivation and performance counseling 40 years ago. Modern sport at every level of competition and in virtually every sporting activity has benefited from the application of psychological principles and mental training in the pursuit of maximum athletic performance, stress management, improved training attitude and every other aspect of sport where the mind, emotions and physical performance intersect.

**Keywords:** Role of sports psychology, nature and function performance

### Introduction

Psychology is the study of the nature and function of the mind, with particular emphasis placed on the relationship between thought and physical action. Psychology has become increasingly important in sports, particularly with respect to the improvement and maintenance of athletic performance. Sport psychology is an aspect of sport training and preparation; this science is primarily directed at assisting individual athletes and teams maintain an optimal balance between mind and body, both in terms of the physical execution of the technical aspects of the sport and the related functions of emotion and mood. Many athletes who possess superior physical gifts are rarely able to seemingly combine athletic talent and mental control; sport psychology is directed at the building and reinforcement of that connection. Sport psychology is a separate but related study from sports medicine.

Formal psychological training is a combination of intense academic study and practical applications; sport psychology is an accepted subscript of the science. Sport psychologists typically are persons with an interest in and an understanding of the mechanics and the dynamics of both sport and sport coaching. At an elite competitive level, the athlete/coach/psychologist triangle is usually very tightly formed, particularly in support of athletes who compete in individual sports.

Sport psychology has grown remarkably from its roots in the amorphous and poorly understood disciplines of athlete motivation and performance counseling 40 years ago (Dosil, 2005; Cox, 2005). Modern sport at every level of competition and in virtually every sporting activity has benefited from the application of psychological principles and mental training in the pursuit of maximum athletic performance, stress management, improved training attitude and every other aspect of sport where the mind, emotions and physical performance intersect. Sports performance is determined by a combination of physiological factors, technical skill, tactical insight and state of mind. All four factors are critical to peak performance. One could argue however that the last of these is the executive function, as it is the mind which determines whether or not what you have trained in over the past few years, is brought out on the day – at that moment when it matters most.

Yet it is this aspect of sports performance which has traditionally been paid the least attention in preparation for competition. Hence, in a world where many athletes are physically, technically and tactically increasingly similar, it is the mind which offers perhaps the greatest

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scope for a competitive advantage. The role of mind has become even more important with the rapidly increasing commercialization of sport, which has presented new pressures for athletes across many levels and ages. Fortunately, like the other three factors, the mind can be improved through training. The more the mental skills are learned and practiced, the better and the more consistent the performances become. There is little doubt that in future, proper mental preparation will become as routinely integrated into training and competition as the other factors already are.

There is no single sports psychology approach. Team sports and the dynamics of group interaction are entirely different than the pursuits of individual competition. The nature of the sport itself will play a significant role in how the athlete may be assisted; certain sports, by their nature, are likely to attract certain types of personalities. A cross-country skier and the object of the sport are a polar opposite to the goals of a weightlifter or a boxer. While individuals in their sport may require varying psychological approaches, the science of sports psychology is founded on a number of constants. Sport psychology, as a support to the athlete, will invariably include work in three general areas: goal setting, imagery and simulation, and development of better powers of concentration.

Goal setting is a planning process that occurs as a part of an assessment of the overall needs and abilities of an athlete. Goals must ultimately be realistic; to set objectives that are unattainable for an athlete is to guarantee failure. Goal setting involves the determination of such issues as the athlete's ability to self-motivate and the personal measure of self-confidence. The sports psychologist, along with the athlete and the coaches, can play a role in the prioritizing of competitive events within the training year; effective coaches will create a schedule that is often referred to as periodization of training, when the year is divided into the constituent parts of competitive season, off-season and pre-season. Sport psychology principles are of particular application in the athlete's development of a feedback loop, where the constant analysis, reevaluation, and refocusing of training and competitive direction, occurs regarding performance.

Imagery and simulation training and techniques form the second branch of sport psychology. Although commonly treated as a single entity, imagery and simulation are two distinct psychological approaches to sport training and preparation.

The physical training undertaken by any athlete requires the development of the athlete's brain and the pathways of the nervous system, particularly those of the peripheral system that extend to the musculoskeletal structure that is directed and powered to achieve movement. The more specific and focused the nerve impulses initiated by the brain in respect of the intended physical movements of the sport, the more effective the athlete will be in execution of the required movements of the sport.

Imagery is a psychological technique where the athlete is conditioned to prepare for sport through the use of the mind. Imagery includes the development of set thought patterns, composed of often abstract words or images that the athlete finds helpful in reinforcing the focus on the activity. Images are developed between the athlete and the psychologist to trigger certain types of emotions that the athlete may wish to harness at appropriate times. The common emotions that are tied to imagery are those that calm the athlete in a tense environment, ones that motivate the athlete to increase intensity where the athlete may be at a lower level of intensity

than is desired, or images to heighten the ability to block out all extraneous activity or distraction.

The images may be personal to the athlete's experience, or they may be created to spur a particular reaction. Once taught, imagery is a self-motivational tool, portable in that the images and their keys are carried in the athlete's mind. An example is the use of the word "wind" and words associated with the performance and the nature of wind in relation to how a distance runner might imagine his or her own performance. The abstract wind is connected to the reality of what the athlete seeks to achieve.

Simulation is a mental training process that is a direct linkage between mental control and the sport. Simple simulations include the mental rehearsal of sport-specific techniques such as the mental review of all aspects of a foul shot in basketball, from the first approach to the foul line to the ball falling through the cylinder. An important component of effective simulation is the appreciation of all of the senses that the athlete would expect to engage at the time of the actual event being simulated. Using the basketball foul shot as an example, the player would be encouraged to think not only of the mechanics of the shot, but how the ball feels in the shooter's hand, the sensation of the player's shoes on the floor, and the sound made by the ball as it swishes through the mesh of the basket on a successful attempt. Simulation seeks to build the entire act and its surrounding physical circumstances in the mind, to better equip the athlete to deal with those related sensations during competition.

Simulation is the mental companion to the physical training involved in sports practice. The live drills used by teams to prepare for competition are the mirror to the mental training and psychological preparation of simulation. The overriding purpose of both imagery and simulation in sport is to assist in the development of confidence in the athlete.

The development of the athlete's powers of concentration is the third general component of sport psychology. In many respects, the maintenance of concentration powers is the most difficult mental effort extended by an athlete, as concentration is influenced by both physical circumstances such as fatigue or injury, as well as the mental aspects of competitive pressure and other distracting variables. Sports psychologists often seek to develop a number of specific attributes to mental performance as a general increase in the powers of concentration in an athlete. The first of these qualities is focus. In both training and competitive situations, an athlete must maintain a relentless attention on the matters at hand. Focus is applicable to both the mechanics of the sport, as well as the maintenance of the required intensity to perform at the desired level.

Mood is the next factor to be controlled in the enhancement of concentration powers. Sport psychology provides for an intensely individualized analysis when determining the ideal mood suitable for the best performance in any given athlete. As a general proposition, the psychologist will seek to assist the athlete in attaining the desired mood. Imagery is sometimes employed, as are external stimuli such as music.

The athlete's activation level is a concept closely related to the mood of the athlete, as every athlete has an emotional point where he or she is sufficiently mentally stimulated to possess the desire and the drive to perform, without being so excited by the prospect of competition that the athlete loses concentration regarding the execution of the required physical aspects of the sport. The phrase "to get psyched up" is a simple example of words that are used to take the athlete to the activation level. Another tool to maintain activation level

in an athlete is positive self-talk, where the athlete is encouraged to talk silently for constant self-encouragement throughout an event.

Sports psychologists will also seek to equip the athlete with personal stress management tools; if an athlete succumbs to the stress of competition, he or she will not be able to succeed. The control of stressful factors by the athlete, especially when the athlete is able to direct some of the energy that is created by stress into positive performance, is among the goals of the psychologist.

Pressure is a more generalized emotional factor that is closely related to stress. Pressure is often driven by external circumstances, such as the expectations of a parent, a team, or a coach. It is a factor that tends to undermine the power of concentration. Pressure is often subtle and more diffuse than the stress that is associated with a specific event. Pressure may often be related to insecurity or a poor self-image on the part of the athlete. Sports psychologists often work with athletes to establish reasonable expectations to assist with the ability to deal with the variables of sport performance.

The overall maintenance of mental and emotional balance on the part of the athlete's mental outlook is a powerful weapon against overtraining. The science of psychology has long recognized two general classifications of personalities, labeled type A and type B. Type A persons are those who are intense, perfectionist, and demanding individual. Type Bs are relaxed and easygoing people. Type A athletes are the most vulnerable to overtraining syndrome, as these persons will tend to push themselves past healthy physical and emotional limits in their pursuit of excellence.

There is a powerful relationship between mental and physical performance in sport. The development of a wide range of mental powers, such as focus and concentration, elevates athletic performance; over-analyzing detracts from the athlete's ability to react instinctively, an attribute that is usually a more desirable quality than the ability to reason through every sporting circumstance.

Top ten ways that you can benefit from sports psychology:

#### **1. Improve focus and deal with distractions.**

Many athletes have the ability to concentrate, but often their focus is displaced on the wrong areas such as when a batter thinks "I need to get a hit" while in the batter's box, which is a result oriented focus. Much of my instruction on focus deals with helping athlete to stay focused on the present moment and let go of results.

#### **2. Grow confidence in athletes who have doubts.**

Doubt is the opposite of confidence. If you maintain many doubts prior to or during your performance, this indicates low self-confidence or at least you are sabotaging what confidence you had at the start of the competition. Confidence is what I call a core mental game skill because of its importance and relationship to other mental skills. To identify the level of arousal or mental activation that is necessary for each person to perform his or her best. This will vary from person to person and from sport to sport. Feeling "up" and positively charged is critical, but not getting overly excited is also important. You have to tread a fine line between being excited to complete, but not getting over-excited.

#### **3. Develop coping skills to deal with setbacks and errors.**

Emotional control is a prerequisite to getting into the zone. Athletes with very high and strict expectations, have trouble dealing with minor errors that are a natural part of sports. It's

important to address these expectations and also help athletes stay composed under pressure and when they commit errors or become frustrated.

#### **4. Find the right zone of intensity for your sport.**

I use intensity in a broad sense to identify the level of arousal or mental activation that is necessary for each person to perform his or her best. This will vary from person to person and from sport to sport. Feeling "up" and positively charged is critical, but not getting overly excited is also important. You have to tread a fine line between being excited to complete, but not getting over-excited.

#### **5. Help teams develop communication skills and cohesion.**

A major part of sports psychology and mental training is helping teams improve cohesion and communication. The more a team works as a unit, the better the results for all involved.

#### **6. To instill a healthy belief system and identify irrational thoughts.**

One of the areas I pride myself on is helping athlete identify ineffective beliefs and attitudes such as comfort zones and negative self-labels that hold them back from performing well. These core unhealthy beliefs must be identified and replaced with a new way of thinking. Unhealthy or irrational beliefs will keep you stuck no matter how much you practice or hard you try.

#### **7. Improve or balance motivation for optimal performance.**

It's important to look at your level of motivation and just why you are motivated to play your sport. Some motivators are better in the long-term than others. Athletes who are extrinsically motivated often play for the wrong reasons, such as the athlete who only participates in sports because of a parent. I work with athlete to help them adopt a healthy level of motivation and be motivated for the right reasons.

#### **8. Develop confidence post-injury.**

Some athletes find themselves fully prepared physically to get back into competition and practice, but mentally some scars remain. Injury can hurt confidence, generate doubt during competition, and cause a lack of focus. I help athletes mentally heal from injuries and deal with the fear of re-injury.

#### **9. To develop game-specific strategies and game plans.**

All great coaches employ game plans, race strategies, and course management skills to help athletes mentally prepare for competition. This is an area beyond developing basic mental skills in which a mental coach helps athletes and teams. This is very important in sports such as golf, racing, and many team sports.

#### **10. To identify and enter the "zone" more often.**

This incorporates everything I do in the mental side of sports. The overall aim is to help athletes enter the zone by developing foundational mental skills that can help athletes enter the zone more frequently. It's impossible to play in the zone every day, but you can set the conditions for it to happen more often. I will add that sports psychology may not be appropriate for every athlete. Note very person who plays a sport wants to "improve performance." Sport psychology is probably not for recreation athletes who participate for the social component of a sport or do not spend time working on

technique or fitness to

Improve performance. Young athletes whose parents want them to see a sports Psychologist are not good candidate either. It's very important that the athlete desires to improve his or her mental game without having the motive to satisfy a parent. Similarly, an athlete who sees a mental game expert only to satisfy a coach is not going to fully benefit from mental training.

Athletes who use sports psychology techniques to improve their performance often focus on mental preparation, motivation and visualization. All of these strategies can definitely work, but there are some sports psychology mistakes many athletes make without realizing it. Here are three of the most common sports psychology mistakes athletes make, and tips to help you avoid them.

### 1. Visualizing Only One Outcome

According to sports psychologist "JoAnn Dahlkoetter" many athletes visualize only one, perfect scenario, perfect race and perfect outcome to their event. While it's necessary to visualize a positive outcome, Dr. Dahlkoetter reminds athletes that they must also visualize a positive outcome for a variety of possible scenarios. For example, they should visualize a race in which they come from behind, or come back strong despite an equipment breakdown, bad weather, a change of race course or start time, and other 'less than perfect' conditions. By having mentally rehearsed success in many possible situations, an athlete is much more likely to stay calm, focused and confident no matter what happens on race day.

### 2. Focusing on Mistakes

Many athletes unwittingly mentally rehearse mistakes by repeating them over and over in their minds in an attempt to learn what went wrong. While it's good to understand what mistake was made, by replaying it over and over in your mind you actually make it more likely to keep recurring. Dr. Dahlkoetter explains that the body will follow your mental instructions, unless you rewrite the mistake and visualize yourself doing it correctly. So it's important to visualize yourself 'getting it right' over and over until it feels natural.

### 3. Over or Under Arousal During Competition

The third big mistake many athletes make on event day is being either over or under aroused. Too much energy, nerves or race-day jitters can result in performance anxiety and interfere with mental focus. In the worst case scenario, too much nervous energy can result in "choking," a decrease in athletic performance due to feeling too much perceived stress.

On the other hand, too little arousal can lead to a mental withdrawal and an "I just don't care" attitude which is very mentally defeating. The right amount of mental arousal is necessary to perform well. Athletes need time, practice and experience to learn what is the appropriate amount of arousal required for them to do their best, but keeping track of arousal levels is helpful.

So we can say as one progresses up the chain of great athletic performers, it gets continually more difficult to beat the oppositions by raw physical talent and strength alone. The higher one gets, the more even the playing field becomes. Consequentially, sport performance is contingent upon mental preparation and psychological strength. As physical preparation for upcoming competitions begins so should

mental preparation. This includes a commitment to setting clear short-term goals, building confidence by entertaining positive thoughts, concentrating on using self-affirmations and imagery, and maintaining control through negative thought stopping. Sport Psychology may not have founded the idea that in order to succeed, one must possess a certain level of confidence in one's own ability however this new area of concentration is focusing on the implications and importance of Psychological training. By acquiring an understanding of the affects one's mind has on their sport performance—a closer consistency of achieving maximum potential will occur. Sports, like life, is a triad containing three critical main points that must be constantly juggled. True potential can never be fully realized if all three areas of concentration—physical, physiological, and tactical—are not developed and practiced.

*"So little is required to be successful in sport. It's certainly mostly a matter of psychology and in the end it's that psychological difference that decides whether you win or lose."*

(Sven Goran-Eriksson, England Football Manager)

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