

PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPAREDNESS IN SPORTS

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INTRODUCTION

Coaches always think that athletes should practice longer and harder - they are hesitant to include psychological tools in their training and performance regime. It is important to address all the components that make up a successful athletic performance - mental as well as physical. Since an athlete does not enter into competition with a completely empty head, one must include mental skills in their training and conditioning programmes as well. These mental skills will enable the athletes to develop the strategies which will prepare them to enter in to a competition with “proper mindset”

Traditionally, no attention has been given to the cognitive aspects of performance. Coaches and athletes have devoted most of their attention to the physical components of performance. It is increasingly important to integrate the mental and physical aspect for better sports performance.

“I was so tense or I was psyched out,” “She is so good but she cannot handle the competition stress,” “I was so scared....,” “I wasn't psyched enough.” These are all comments frequently used to describe competitive disappointments. An athlete seldom realizes that the failure to achieve was related to poor or inadequate preparation of psychological strategies. After a competition the greatest percentage of excuses are generally attributed to the mental and emotional aspects of the game. Yet, almost no time is spent in incorporating these into the training routine. Rather, it is a case of back to the drawing board for a new physical strategy or increased practice time.

Basically what sport psychology does for the athletes is to teach them how to identify the factors that lead to good performance and those that lead to poor performance. This provides a basis for understanding why an athlete performs well or inconsistently. The athlete will not have to say “I had a good competition” or “I had an off-

day,” he or she will be able to analyze why it was a good or bad competition. Psychological preparation helps the athletes to attain a focused, confident and trusting mindset so that they are able to compete at their highest level. It is the deliberate, systematic practice of strategies and methods designed to enhance an athlete's performance, by enhancing their psychological skills.

SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

Sports psychology is the study of how the mind affects physical activity and athletic performance. According to the American Psychological Association, “sports psychology addresses the interactions between psychology and sport performance, including the psychological aspects of optimal athletic performance, the psychological care and well-being of athletes, coaches, and sport organizations, and the connection between physical and psychological functioning.”

Sports performance is determined by a combination of physiological factors, technical skills, tactical insight and state of mind. All four factors are critical to peak performance. In a world where many athletes are physically, technically and tactically increasingly similar, it is the mind which offers perhaps the greatest scope for a competitive advantage. The role of mind has become even more important with the rapidly increasing commercialization of sport, which has opened new pressures for athletes. Fortunately, like other three factors, mind can be improved extensively through training. The more the mental skills are learned and practiced, the better and the more consistent the performances become.

ROLE OF SPORTS PSYCHOLOGISTS IN PREPARATION OF AN ATHLETE

The importance of a sports psychologist as an integral member of the coaching and health care teams is widely recognized. Sports psychologists can teach skills to help athletes enhance their learning process and motor skills, cope with competitive pressures, fine-tune the level of awareness needed for optimal performance, and stay focused amid the many distractions of team travel and in the competitive environment. Psychological preparation should be an integral part of an athlete's holistic training process, carried out in conjunction with other training elements. Sports psychologists primarily teach athletes mental game skills to improve their performance and learning.

Help Athletes Cope with Performance Fears

Sports psychologist can help athletes overcome fears, such as fear of failure, fear of embarrassment, and general performance anxiety. This is common among athletes who are perfectionists or highly dedicated athletes that worry too much about what other people think about their performance.

Help Athletes Improve Mental Skills for Performance

The most common role for a sports psychologist is to teach mental skills for enhanced performance. A mental game expert can help the athlete to improve confidence, focus, composure, intensity, and trust in athletic performance. These mental skills help athletes improve performance and can help in other areas of an athlete's life.

Help Athlete Mentally Prepare for Competition

Another role of a sports psychologist is to help athletes mentally prepare for competition and practice. This includes many of the mental skills mentioned above, but applied to specific situations on the athletic field.

Help Athletes Return After Injury

Returning to play after an injury can sometimes be difficult for many athletes depending on the nature of the injury. Athletes are often left with “mental scars” long after an injury is physically healed. Injured athletes commonly experience at least three emotional responses: isolation, frustration and disturbances of mood. A sports psychologist can help injured athletes cope better with the pressures associated with returning to a prior level of performance—pre-injury.

Help Athlete Develop Pregame Routine

As a part of mental preparation, the role of a sports psychologist includes helping athletes develop mental skills used during pregame or pre race routines. Athletes learn how to focus on the process instead of results and be more proactive with their confidence prior to competition. That is why, sports psychologists' services are required with a national level and international level teams. They create the will 'to win' in the players.

Help Athletes Develop Preshot Routines

Preshot routines are another common role of a sports psychologist. Here, athletes learn how to use mental skills to prepare for a specific motor skill, such as a golf shot, free throw, or field goal kick.

Help Athletes Improve Practice Efficiency

Sports psychologist helps athletes to improve the quality or efficiency of their practice. Many athletes, such as collegiate athletes, have limited practice time. Coaches want to help these athletes get the most out of their practice time by understanding principles of motor learning and performance.

SKILLS AND PROCEDURES UTILIZED

Many strategies and procedures are used by sport psychologists to prepare and to address the problems faced by athletes and sports participants. Some of them are mentioned below:

Arousal Regulation

Arousal regulation refers to entering into and maintaining an optimal level of cognitive and physiological activation in order to maximize performance. Excessive level of arousal leads to increased muscular tension, poor decision making, loss of concentration, and disrupted rhythm and co-ordination. Recognizing and controlling the level of arousal is important to maximize athletic achievement. This may include relaxation if one becomes too anxious through methods such as progressive muscle relaxation, breathing exercises, and meditation, or the use of energizing techniques (e.g., listening to music) if one is not alert enough.

Goal Setting

Goal setting is the process of systematically planning ways to achieve specific accomplishments within a certain amount of time. Goals should be specific, measurable, difficult but attainable, time-based, written down, and also there should be a combination of short-term and long-term goals. Each long-term goal should also have a series of short-term goals that progress in difficulty. For instance, short-term goals should progress from those that are easy to achieve to those that are more challenging. Goal setting is a widely used as a powerful motivational technique for the enhancement of performance and productivity in sport. Goal setting can improve athlete's motivation by eliciting commitment, perseverance, dedication and effort. Goals provide focus and direction to one's activities or actions.

Imagery

Imagery can be defined as using multiple senses to create or recreate experiences in one's mind. Vivid images are more likely to be interpreted by the brain as identical to the actual event, which increases the effectiveness of mental practice with imagery. Good imagery, therefore, attempts to create as lifelike image as possible through the use of multiple senses (e.g., sight, smell), proper timing, perspective, and accurate portrayal of the task. Imagery is an effective tool to enhance performance and psychological states relevant to performance (e.g., confidence). This is a concept commonly used by coaches and athletes the day before an event.

Pre performance Routines

Pre performance routines refer to the actions and behaviours athletes use to prepare for a game or performance. This includes pregame routines, warm up routines, and actions an athlete will regularly do, mentally and physically, before they execute the performance. Frequently, these will incorporate other commonly used techniques, such as imagery or self-talk. Examples would be, dribbling done by basketball players at the foul line, and pre shot routines by golfers or baseball players use prior to a shot or pitch. These routines help to develop consistency and predictability for the player. This allows the muscles and mind to develop

better motor control.

Self-Talk

Self-talk refers to the thoughts and words athletes and performers say to themselves, usually in their minds. Self-talk phrases (or cues) are used to direct attention towards a particular thing in order to improve focus. Self-confidence of an athlete that is needed to be mentally tough can be maintained through positive self-talk.

Positive self-talk is universally practiced by champions. Self-talk can be broken down into three types; motivational (desire to achieve), mastery based (to enhance confidence), and instructional (reaffirming competition goals, using other mental skills). Using motivational self-talk helped the athletes to maintain and increase their drive to do well. It helped them get psyched up and relaxed for a good performance. When an athlete had mastered self-talk there will be high levels of focus, self-confidence and an ability to cope in difficult situations. They will be able to focus on task relevant factors not task-irrelevant factors..This characteristic of positive self-talk is present in all mentally tough athletes.

Mastering over Confidence

Confidence can be defined as how strongly an individual believe in one's ability. It is important to believe in one's ability because if they do not believe that they have the ability to perform, then they will not be able to perform up to their fullest capabilities. Confidence demonstrates faith in one's ability and their preparation.

Confidence is a deep, lasting, and resilient belief in one's ability. With confidence, an athlete is able to stay confident even when he/she is not performing well. It keeps athlete positive, motivated, intense, focused, and emotionally in control when required. Confidence also encourages to see difficult situations and tough opponents as challenges to pursue. The greatest disruption to confidence is failure.

There are several ways to master the confidence: the athlete should develop the attitude that demanding situations are challenges to be sought out, athletes should believe that experiencing new challenges is a necessary part of becoming the best athlete, the athletes must be mentally prepared to meet the challenges, they should stay positive and motivated in the face of the difficulties, focus should be on what is to be needed to overcome the challenges, the athlete must accept the fact that they may experience failure when faced with new challenges.

Mastering Concentration Skills

Concentration is essential component of performance. The most important element of concentration is the ability to focus one's attention on the task at hand and thereby not be disturbed or affected by irrelevant external and internal stimuli. External stimuli may include an audience yelling, music, bad officiating calls, and unsportsmanlike behaviour from opponents. Internal stimuli include distracting body

sensations and thoughts and feelings such as “My heart is exploding in my chest”, “I’m really tired, and “Don’t be nervous,” the pain is fierce, My opponents is bigger and better”. While external and internal stimuli appear to be separate categories, they continually affect each other. Almost every external event will evoke thoughts and an emotional shift in the athlete and a corresponding change in the responses of the body. Similarly, a change in one’s thoughts and feelings changes to what one attends and how one attends. Because this interaction occurs all the time, coaches and sport psychologists must train athletes to cope with these changes under pressure situations such as a major competition. Unless concentration skills have been mastered, performance will almost always suffer. Failure to develop or utilize concentration skills has resulted in the downfall of many athletes.

Ironically, trying to concentrate is also not concentrating. Concentration means focusing, not forcing, one’s attention on a task. At times this may be perceived as shielding ourselves from stimuli that might penetrate and disturb our focus of attention. Active shielding by itself would be a distraction. Thus, concentration is the learned skill of not reacting to or being distracted by irrelevant stimuli. Concentration also means being totally in the present. When minds drift into the past or future, then athlete will not be as effective in the ongoing present performance. The ability to concentrate is a skill, and like any other skill it can be developed and improved through practice. We either learn to decrease attention to irrelevant stimuli or increase attention to relevant stimuli.

The above mentioned psychological processes are used by the athletes to improve their mental skills. Like any other skills, these also require practice and athletes should also be encouraged to spend quality time on practicing and developing these skills in their daily training schedule.

PHASES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILL TRAINING

Psychological preparation involves systematic training of mental skills to enhance sports performance. This will help an athlete to build a mindset which in turn will allow him/her to perform in a consistent manner.

Educational Phase

The first phase of psychological skill training (PST) is educational because many athletes are generally not familiar and knowledgeable with the fact that mental skills do enhance performance. The phase is suggested to take place in team and individual meetings during the training period. Education phase will enable athletes to recognize and acknowledge the importance of acquiring PST to enhance their performance. To achieve this goal, it is important to ask participants how they view the mental side of sports performance.

It is also essential to let them know that psychological skills can be

learned over time. This phase is also the best stage for the teams counselor to perform a needs assessment. The assessment aims to find out which mental skills of the athletes are the most important to develop. Aside from this, the assessment is a helpful tool in determining what mental training tools will be used in developing those skills. This should be conducted so that the athletes know their strengths and weaknesses and the counselor can help them to maximize their efficiency towards success. This is also the stage where strategies are applied to suit the specific needs and abilities of athletes. The primary goal of this phase is to aid the athletes in developing their desired skills. Psychological skills need to be learned and practiced. Expect improvement as an individual develop these skills and refine them over time.

Acquisition Phase

Acquisition phase is used for strategies and techniques needed to learn psychological skills. This is also the stage where strategies are applied to suit the specific needs and abilities of athletes. The primary goal of this phase is to aid the athletes in developing their desired skills. The phase can be conducted during team meetings and training sessions incorporated with the implementation of skill and method. This can also be facilitated through personal practice.

For instance, the counselor can facilitate discussion on positive copying statements to eliminate negative statements under stressful conditions as a way to teach athletes about the development of arousal regulation skills. The counselor can also teach them on how to use positive coping as applied to actual settings. It is important to tailor training programs to meet individual needs. Counsellor can provide general information to the group or team, but be specific when developing an individual’s PST program.

Practice Phase

Once the athletes have understood and incorporated their desired skills, they have to move to the next phase. This phase has three primary objectives:

- 1) To automate skills through over learning,
- 2) To teach athletes to include and apply psychological skills to real settings and
- 3) To simulate skills that one wants to apply in actual settings.

The practice phase indicates that mental training tools and skills are only effective when athletes have over learned them. This means that athletes can use these tools and skills automatically without consciously thinking of when and how they will use them.

To achieve this goal, the athlete must use these tools and skills through different ways such as simulations and competitions. Athletes can simulate adverse situation during practice so that he/she can deal

with the situations during competition. Through simulation, this phase can assist the athletes in applying mental skills in the game plan while at the same time dealing with challenges.

CONCLUSION

Success or failure on the field often depends on mental as well as the other factors. It will certainly take some time, for mental preparation to receive the same attention as its physical and technical counterparts. Now days, sports competitions are becoming tougher, the athletes and coaches has to look for every opportunity to gain the competitive edge that separates success from failure. When the limit of physical conditioning and technique is reached at the highest level, it will be necessary for athletes to mentally prepare themselves to achieve success in sports. Although most athletes do understand that their psychological preparation influences performance but few actively adopt the psychological processes necessary for them to excel in their game. For making any mental skill training effective, it is important that it should be accepted by the athlete as useful tool. To enhance and achieving consistency in performance, the athletes needs to utilize, develop and practice variety of mental skills which is essential for attaining expertise especially in sports. This is best accomplished by a collaborative effort among the coach, the sport psychologist, and the athlete.

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