

A Study of Sports Psychology and the Competitive Mind Edge

^aRavindra Baliram Khandare, ^bVishal Pawar

^aDirector of Physical Education, Arts, Commerce & Science, College Sonai, Tq. Newasa, Dist. Ahmadnagar - 414105, Maharashtra, India

^bDirector of Physical Education, R.B.M.B. College, Shrirampur, Dist. Ahmadnagar, Maharashtra, India

Abstract

The specialised field of sports psychology has developed rapidly in recent years. The importance of a sports psychologist as an integral member of the coaching and health care teams is widely recognised. 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 training should be an integral part of an athlete's holistic training process, carried out in conjunction with other training elements. This is best accomplished by a collaborative effort among the coach, the sport psychologist, and the athlete; however, a knowledgeable and interested coach can learn *basic* psychological skills and impart them to the athlete, especially during actual practice. When a competitor 'freezes' in the big moment or commits an inexplicable error, anxiety, in one of its many guises, is very often the root cause. The precise impact of anxiety on sporting performance depends on how you interpret your world. Unfortunately, far too many athletes accept high levels of anxiety as an inevitable part of the total sporting experience and fail to reach their potential.

KEYWORDS:- competitive, athlete, psychologists, anxiety, coach.

Introduction

Sport is littered with the broken dreams of those who wavered when they most needed to be in *control* of themselves and focused on the task at hand. Costas Karageorg his explores the nature of anxiety and its common symptoms, reviews the latest competition anxiety research, and provides you with five techniques that either control anxiety or channel it positively into your performance.

When a competitor 'freezes' in the big moment or commits an inexplicable error, anxiety, in one of its many guises, is very often the root cause. The precise impact of anxiety on sporting performance depends on how you interpret your world. Unfortunately, far too many athletes accept high levels of anxiety as an inevitable part of the total sporting experience and fail to reach their potential.

Anxiety is a natural reaction to threats in the environment and part of the preparation for the 'fight or flight' response. This is our body's primitive and automatic response that prepares it to 'fight' or 'flee' from perceived harm or attack. It is a

'hardwired' response that ensures survival of the human species. Sporting competition promotes similar psychological and bodily responses because there is often a threat posed towards the ego; your sense of self-esteem. Essentially, when the demands of training or competition exceed one's perceived ability, anxiety is the inevitable outcome.

Sport places a wide variety of stressors upon participants; it can be physically exhausting, it pitches you against superior opponents, hostile fans might verbally abuse you, the elements may need to be overcome and your emotional frailties are constantly laid bare for all to see. Despite this, sport offers participants an opportunity for growth – a chance to push back personal boundaries, and a means by which to liberate the body and the mind.

Ostensibly, there is nothing damaging about the stress associated with a sporting contest, and in fact stress can be a very positive influence that leads us to tackle the challenges that make life far more rewarding. However, when we perceive stress to be negative, it causes anxiety and therefore, much depends upon how we view the demands placed upon us.

It has long been acknowledged that psychological skills are critical for athletes at the elite level. Athletes with the requisite "mental toughness" are more likely to be successful. In the past, it was assumed that these skills were genetically based, or acquired early in life. Now, it is commonly accepted that athletes and coaches are capable of learning a broad range of psychological skills that can play a critical role in learning and in performance.

A. Role of Sports Psychology

The specialised field of sports psychology has developed rapidly in recent years. The importance of a sports psychologist as an integral member of the coaching and health care teams is widely recognised. 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 training should be an integral part of an athlete's holistic training process, carried out in conjunction with other training elements. This is best accomplished by a collaborative effort among the coach, the sport psychologist, and the athlete; however, a knowledgeable and interested coach can learn *basic* psychological skills and impart them to the athlete, especially during actual practice.

B. The Medical Staff and Psychosomatic Disorders

The health professional often plays a major role in supporting the emotional health of athletes. An athlete's psychological stresses may be manifested as somatic complaints, such as sleep disturbances, irritability, fatigue, gastrointestinal disturbances, muscle tension, or even injury. Athletes often turn to a therapist or physician for relief, either because they do not recognise the psychological basis of the physical complaint, or because they fear the services of a mental health practitioner due to the perceived stigma, or because no psychologist is available.

Therapists must be aware of the possibility of an underlying psychological basis for a complaint and inquire into the emotional status of the athlete as part of the medical history. Careful, non-judgmental questioning may reveal inter-personal problems with a

coach, teammate, family member, or other individuals, or anxiety concerning an upcoming competition. In these situations, a sports psychologist is invaluable. If none is available, the physician or therapist may need to assume the role of sounding board, intermediary, or stress-management advisor. At times, being a patient listener and confidant may be all that is required. If mediation between parties is required, a neutral, non-judgmental stance must be maintained to help the parties air and resolve differences.

C. Preparing for Competition

Simple psychological skills to help the athlete manage the competitive performance environment include: 1) learning relaxation skills (e.g. progressive relaxation; slow, controlled, deep abdominal breathing; or autogenic training); 2) mastering all of the attentional styles (types of concentration); 3) imagery (both visualisation and kinesthetics); 4) appropriate self-talk; and 5) developing a precompetition mental routine to be employed immediately prior to competition on game day (these routines are short [1–2 minutes] and use all of the mental skills just presented).

D. The Injured Athlete

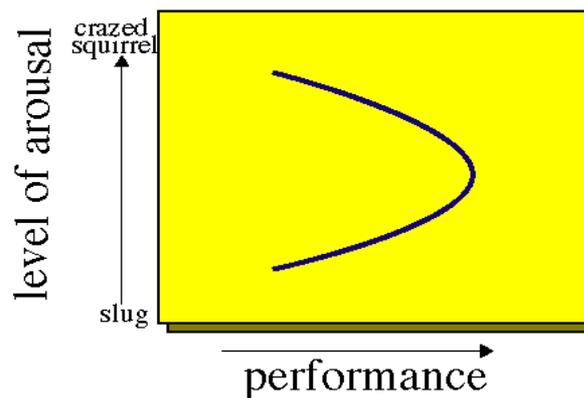
Athletes have a strong sense of body awareness, and take great pride in the capabilities of their bodies. Thus, injuries can be psychologically as well as physically devastating. The ability to train and compete well involves enormous ego. Athletes often identify themselves by who they are as an athlete. Thus, an injury places considerable stress on this self-identification. The more severe the injury, and the longer the recovery-rehabilitation period, the more prolonged and profound the mood disturbance may be. Injured athletes commonly experience at least three emotional responses: isolation, frustration, and disturbances of mood:

1. The injury forces the athlete to become separated from teammates and coaches. Other team members may provide little support, and in fact they may shun their injured teammate to avoid reminders of their own potential frailty.
2. The athlete becomes frustrated because he or she perceives the loss of months of training and skills mastery, although there are many instances where athletes have used the recovery period to master mental and other physical skills to return successfully to competition.
3. Mood disturbances are common. The athlete may be temporarily depressed, or become upset by minor annoyances. An injury can provide the athlete with an opportunity to work with a caring professional to re-assess his or her reasons for being in sport, and for redefining goals in sports participation.

The health care team must be aware and include psychological support as an integral part of the treatment and rehabilitation processes. At the outset, the athlete must be fully informed about the nature and severity of the injury, the prognosis for recovery, recommended course of therapy and rehabilitation, and an estimate of the time needed before training can be resumed. The athlete must be made a full partner in the treatment and recovery process, and given responsibility for therapeutic activities that can be carried out at home. The medical team must discuss openly the psychological changes that accompany an injury, and reassure the athlete that this is to be expected. Reassurance and supportive measures are generally adequate, but a visit from an athlete who has recovered from a similar injury may be of great value.

In the drive to get faster, the mind is often an untapped resource. Utilizing a variety of sports psychological skills can enhance performance, improve consistency in training and competition, and minimize or eliminate undesirable mental states, such as anger, frustration, and burnout. Although most athletes understand that their psychological status influences performance, too few actively use the skills necessary to help themselves. Frequently, after a poor race, the psychological factors go unrecognized and the athlete blames other aspects (e.g., diet, training). This article will introduce a few basic tools which may help you feel better in your training and give you that extra edge in racing.

One concept to appreciate is that the level of mental arousal influences performance. If this level is either too high or too low then performance suffers. The ideal zone is right in the middle. A common problem for some athletes is that they get "too keyed up". This 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. Some of the skills useful to regulate arousal (up or down) are **visualization**, **centering**, **progressive muscular relaxation**, and **positive self-talk**. In addition to regulating arousal these skills have a number of other benefits.



- **Visualization** is a technique in which the athlete imagines performing various tasks. It deals not only with the visual but also with 'feel'. A runner might, for example, imagine and experience an efficient, smooth stride while running up a long hill. A triathlete might rehearse the sequence of steps required for a quick transition. The imagery should be what the athlete would experience from the first person perspective, not what he would see watching from the sidelines.
- **Centering** is a skill which enables the athlete to release unwanted muscular tension, become more body-aware, and control anxiety. To do this, sit in a comfortable position, close the eyes and relax the facial muscles. Perform a few quick shakes of the arms, slowly roll the head, and then lower the chin to the chest. Breathe slowly in through the nose. Use the diaphragm, not the chest, to expand the lungs. As you breathe out through the mouth, let yourself relax. Repeat the technique several times until the desired results are achieved.
- **Positive self-talk** is the process of eliminating negative thoughts and promoting constructive ones. Instead of dwelling on the negatives of an unfavorable situation,

the athlete focuses on positives. "I don't run well in the cold", is replaced by, "I have trained well and am prepared. Let's do it!".

- **Progressive muscular relaxation** involves alternatively contracting and relaxing various muscle groups. It is best done lying on the floor, and cycling through the muscles in a set sequence in groups of agonist and antagonist (e.g., quads and hamstrings). In doing this, the mind focuses on each body area and the athlete experiences relaxation and increased body 'feel'.

Conclusion:-

Visualization, centering, and progressive muscular relaxation should be done several times a day in training to get you prepared for their use in competition. Developing these skills takes practice, but it is well worth the effort. Once refined and incorporated into your routine you will be amazed at the results. The increased stress of competitions can cause athletes to react both physically and mentally in a manner that can negatively affect their performance abilities. They may become tense, their heart rates race, they break into a cold sweat, they worry about the outcome of the competition, they find it hard to concentrate on the task in hand. This has led coaches to take an increasing interest in the field of sport psychology and in particular in the area of competitive anxiety. That interest has focused on techniques that athletes can use in the competitive situation to maintain control and optimise their performance. Once learned, these techniques allow the athlete to relax and to focus his/her attention in a positive manner on the task of preparing for and participating in competition. Psychology is another weapon in the athlete's armoury in gaining the winning edge.

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