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Role of psychological skills training in performance enhancement

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Abstract

There are many types of athletes but not all display an optimum level of performance, few achieve more and others less. Many surveys are conducted to know the basic reason behind the success of all these athletes, and almost 60% of them dedicate their reason for success to their psychological skills and the mindset. This is the reason which most athletes fail to identify and those who do are seen on top. There is a saturation point of all physical and strength training beyond that what differentiates athletes is their psychological approaches to the game. For example Muhammad Ali the great boxer has great such skills. In India where there is lack of resources there is a need to realize the importance of PST, this will give a level playing field to the athletes and improve medal tally of India in the international platforms and competitions.

Keywords: psychological skills training, performance enhancement, athletes

Introductions

What psychological skills coaching entails

Psychological skills coaching (PST) refers to systematic and consistent follow of mental or psychological skills for the aim of enhancing performance. Success for elite athletes is dependent on their physical and mental talents, once an athlete is at the highest of her game in each area, the result will be an exceptional performance, increasing enjoyment, or achieving bigger sport and physical activity self-satisfaction. The ways and techniques that are customary parts of local time originally came from a good range of sources, largely among thought science.

These areas enclosed psychotherapy, psychological feature theory and medical aid, rational affectional medical aid, goal setting, basic cognitive process management, progressive muscle relaxation, and systematic desensitization. Coaches and athletes all understand that physical skills got to be often practiced and refined through virtually thousands and thousands of repetitions. Almost like physical skills, psychological skills like maintaining and focusing concentration, regulating arousal levels, enhancing confidence, and maintaining motivation additionally got to be systematically practiced. Within the example, Jim is required to practice the psychological talent of relaxation thus he may influence the pressure of shooting free throws beneath intense game pressure. Simply telling a contestant to relax will not turn out the required response unless the player already is aware of the way to relax through previous follow and coaching.

PST programs will typically be comprehensive and involve a range of skills. Or they may concentrate on only one or 2 skills. The sensible constraints of a scenario (e.g., solely some weeks to find out and implement a PST program) may dictate the sort of program that may be most helpful. However, despite the specifics, mental coaching is vital and following some general pointers can create it simplest.

Why sport and exercise participants neglect PST

If psychological skills are so important for success, why do people spend so little time developing psychological skills to enhance performance? There are three basic reasons why PST is neglected by many coaches and participants.

Lack of knowledge

Many people don't really understand how to teach or practice psychological skills. For example, some coaches teach concentration by shouting, "Concentrate out there!" or "Will you get your mind on what you're supposed to be doing?"

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The implicit assumption is that the player knows how to concentrate but is just not doing it. Another common practice (remember Jim's errant free throws?) is telling a player to "just relax" as he goes into an important performance. But this is not easy to do unless one has had training in relaxation skills. A track-and-field coach would not expect a 100-meter runner to perform well in the 440 she hadn't been running that distance in practice. Similarly, relaxation and concentration must be practiced to become effective tools to use in competition. Coaches and teaching pros have told us that they simply do not feel comfortable teaching mental skills. They know about skill execution and technique (or "Xs and Os") but not about how to teach specific mental skills.

Misunderstandings about psychological skills

People don't enter the world equipped with mental skills-it is a misconception that champions are born rather than made. Despite common assumptions that Serena Williams, Tiger Woods, Derek Jeter, Wayne Gretzky, and other such athletes were blessed with a congenital mental toughness and competitive drive as part of their personality, it doesn't quite work that way. Yes, we are all born with certain physical and psychological predispositions, but skills can be learned and developed, depending on the experiences we encounter. No great athlete ever achieved stardom without endless hours of practice, honing and refining physical skills and techniques. Although some athletes do possess exceptional physical skills, they had to work hard to develop their talents to become champions.

For example, as physically talented and gifted as Michael Jordan was, his competitors said his most impressive trait was his competitiveness. Staying calm under pressure, maintaining concentration despite distractions, and keeping confident in the face of failure are simply not innate. Rather, they are skills that need systematic practice and integration with physical skills

Lack of time

A third reason that coaches and athletes cite for not practicing psychological skills is too little time. In fact, the study of junior tennis coaches noted earlier showed that the coaches saw lack of time as the most important roadblock to teaching mental skills to their players (Gould *et al.*, 1999) ^[12].

Psychological Skills Training Methods

Goal setting, self-talk, mental imagery and mental rehearsal, and relaxation are the four PST methods that Vealy (1988) identified as being the four most prominent PST methods in sports psychology books (as cited in Hardy, *et al.*, 1997) ^[13]. Each method enables the athlete to work on developing more than one psychological skill, so that they are also working on improving and maintaining their strengths, such as commitment, concentration/attention, and motivation, as they build up their weak areas (Weinberg & Gould, 1999) ^[12].

Goal Setting

Goal setting is defined as "what an individual is trying to accomplish; it is the object or aim of an action" (Locke, Shaw, Saari & Latham, 1981, p. 126) ^[9].

The athlete has clear short and long-term goals for their performance, but they have no "process" goals - i.e. 'steps in

short or long-term goal orientation, to aid them in getting there. They also either visualize or verbalize their goals, alone and with their coach, instead of writing them down.

Writing down their goals can help the athlete to set process goals. Weinberg (1993) showed that achieving process goals leads to increased self-confidence, by goal achievement showing improved physical skill mastery and performance (as cited in Hardy, *et al.*, 1997; Weinberg & Gould, 1999) ^[13, 12].

Self-Talk

Self-talk is an internal distracter, and is what we do whenever we talk to ourselves (Weinberg & Gould, 1999) ^[12]. Self-talk has cognitive and motivational functions. (Hardy, *et al.*, 1997) ^[13]. The motivational functions are concerned with a variety of things, amongst them being self-confidence, relaxation and arousal control, (Hardy, *et al.*, 1997, Weinberg & Gould, 1999) ^[13, 12] and maintaining and increasing drive.

In a study done by Perkos *et al.* (2002), it was found that a self-talk intervention program increased confidence and anxiety control (as cited in Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos & Theodorakis, 2007) ^[6], which in turn enhances performance (Hardy, *et al.*, 1997, as cited in Hamilton, Scott & MacDougall, 2007) ^[13, 2].

By increasing drive self-talk acts towards goal achievement, which enhances self-confidence (Weinberg & Gould, 1999) ^[12] suggested that self-talk enhances performance by focusing on a desired thought - i.e. the goal, which leads to the desired outcome (as cited in Hatzigeorgiadis, *et al.*, 2007) ^[6].

Despite studies (Hamilton, *et al.*, 2007) ^[2] done on cyclists showing that both positive and negative self-talk enhanced performance, it has been shown that positive self-talking techniques - i.e. cognitive restructuring, countering, and thought stopping, enhance performance more than negative self-talk, because they enhance self-esteem and attentional focus; whilst negative self-talk increases anxiety by being critical, which has generally been associated with worse performances (Dagrou *et al.*, 1992, as cited in Hardy, *et al.*, 1997; Weinberg & Gould, 1999) ^[13, 12]. It has also been shown that individual athletes utilize self-talk more than team athletes (Hamilton, *et al.*, 2007) ^[2].

Mental Imagery

Mental imagery, when used in conjunction with goal setting and positive self-talk, has been shown to enhance performance more than either PST method used alone (Porter, 2003) ^[11].

Imagery can be used to improve both physical and psychological skills, including the latter skills of self-confidence, control activation, and arousal regulation. For example, visualizing a successful performance under any, especially stressful circumstances, can improve self-confidence; and visualizing such a situation with positive responses and self-talk, is more likely to result in an improved performance (Weinberg & Gould, 1999) ^[12].

Mental imagery simulates the perfect performance, which in turn "trains" the neuromuscular system. "Physical performance improves because your mind can't distinguish between a visualized and actual experience" (Porter, 2003, p. 64) ^[11]. Mental imagery has also been found to improve mental rehearsal (Hardy, *et al.*, 1997) ^[13].

Mental Rehearsal

Mental rehearsal is very similar to mental imagery. It has been shown that mental rehearsal works best when used in conjunction with the actual physical activity—i.e. before practice or competition, although it has also been shown to improve performance in the absence of any physical activity (Meacci & Price, 1985, as cited in Hardy, *et al.*, 1997)^[13].

Relaxation

Relaxation is crucial at top sporting levels; and it is the primary PST technique that athletes use in order to cope with pressure (Hardy, *et al.*, 1997)^[13]. Because the athlete has difficulty getting to sleep, especially nearing and during competition, relaxation must become an important daily aspect.

The most common form of physical relaxation is progressive muscular relaxation (PMR), a method that takes 2-15 minutes to complete. PMR has been used to enhance sporting performance by reducing anxiety and enhancing self-efficacy (Haney, 2004)^[3].

Another form of relaxation is transcendental meditation; this is best used on competition days, anywhere up until an hour before competing, to regain composure and control (Jones, 1999, as cited in Hardy, *et al.*, 1999). "Reddy *et al.*'s (1976) study showed that, when compared to a control group, athletes who meditated for twenty minutes a day during a six-week athletic conditioning program showed significantly greater improvement in sprinting" (Hardy, *et al.*, 1997, p. 16)^[13].

The athlete is a sprinter; therefore meditation is likely to enhance their performance. Relaxation also allows the mind to be more open to mental imagery, which in turn enhances performance further (Porter, 2003)^[11].

Conclusion

Goal setting, positive self-talk, mental imagery and mental rehearsal, and relaxation PST methods have all been proven to improve the psychological skills of self-confidence, control activation, and arousal regulation, amongst others, as well as enhancing the actual physical athletic performance of an athlete.

All four methods have been identified as the most prominent PST methods among both the psychology literature and those utilized by athletes.

Goal setting will build self-confidence through goal achievement (Weinberg, 1993, as cited in Hardy, *et al.*, 1997; Weinberg & Gould, 1999)^[13, 12].

Positive self-talk will allow the athlete to restructure their cognitive processes, through thought stoppage and countering, which will in turn enhance their performance by mentally preparing them for the competition and decreasing anxiety levels (Hamilton, *et al.*, 2007; Hatzigeorgiadis, *et al.*, 2007; Weinberg & Gould, 1999)^[2, 6, 12].

Used alongside goal setting, positive self-talk, and relaxation, mental imagery and mental rehearsal will increase the athlete's self-confidence and manage their arousal, and thus enhance their performance, by ensuring that they know what their objective is, visualizing their goal endlessly with nothing but success, with everything executed perfectly, while they are in the optimal state of arousal (Hardy, *et al.*, 1997; Porter, 2003; Weinberg & Gould, 1999)^[13, 11, 12].

Relaxation, especially in the form of transcendental meditation, before a competition serves to control the

athlete's anxiety and improve their self-confidence, which will enhance their sprinting performance (Reddy *et al.*, 1976, as cited in Hardy, *et al.*, 1997; Weinberg & Gould, 1999)^[13, 12].

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