

Psychological Issues in Sport Performance

In recent years, there has been a growing interest and awareness in sport psychology. The exact nature of what is involved, however, is not widely understood. In this presentation, some of the more important psychological issues in sport performance will be discussed. Other aspects of sport psychology that will not be addressed here include: study of exercise and its benefits, youth sport, coaching education, sport injury, transitions in the life of athletes, gender, racial, and sexual bias, the college athlete, disabled athletes, the problems of violence and drug abuse in sport, eating disorders in athletes, team cohesion, parent involvement, the Olympics, and others.

Self-Confidence and Self-Esteem

Given the demands that sport competition places on the athlete, it is essential that he/she have the self-confidence necessary to meet these requirements. Primarily, this involves trusting one's ability to perform the necessary physical and mental tasks. Developing this trust begins with a realistic appraisal of one's competence, and an awareness of what can and cannot be controlled. It also involves recognition of personal responsibility for making choices and decisions, and for clarifying one's values and goals. All of this is based on a foundation of self-worth and self-esteem, even before one attains the achievement and accomplishment that is so widely emphasized. The most significant obstacle to developing or maintaining this foundation is self-criticism and self-condemnation.

Positive and Negative Thinking

In striving for excellence, many athletes believe it is necessary to criticize, reprimand, or condemn themselves for mistakes, difficulties, or performance that is below expectations. Unfortunately, this approach has undesirable consequences, leading to a decrease in self-confidence and self-esteem, which contributes to impairment in optimal performance. This kind of negative thinking can also lead to predictions of poor performance, descriptions of oneself as inadequate, and unfavorable comparison of self to others. In contrast, athletes can focus on their areas of competence, on excellence of preparation for the task at hand, or on current and past satisfactions. In addition, positive thinking need not be limited to sport performance. In fact, appreciation of oneself outside of sport will improve one's perspective, and help prepare for situations that may arise in the future, such as injury or retirement.

Motivation and Commitment

Athletes participate in sport for many different reasons, among them being: enjoyment, stimulation, excitement, satisfaction, accomplishment, external rewards, recognition, belonging, and others. During the course of a career in sport, however, there may be times when the original reasons for participating begin to diminish. At such times, a sense of commitment, i.e., a determination to pursue one's original goals, is essential to get through the difficult times. This may require refocusing on the original motivations, examining current ones, and re-evaluating whether that determination is still present. If it is not, it may be worthwhile to explore what accounts for the difference. It may be: interest in other pursuits, stress from outside sources
dissatisfaction with current participation, or even a satisfied readiness to move on.

Goal Setting

An important element in achieving optimal performance is goal setting. While the idea of goal setting is generally accepted, certain considerations improve its effectiveness beyond what can

be attained by the more general instruction: "Do your best." Goals are most useful when expressed as what to do, rather than what not to do. In addition, it is advisable to set specific, realistic, and somewhat difficult goals; to set short-term intermediate and long-term goals; and to set performance and process goals, rather than outcome goals. An outcome goal, which is not controllable, represents the results of a competition, i.e., the order of finishing. A performance goal would be the particular time one was aiming to attain; and a process goal might be how best to achieve it. Examples of process goals might be the lap times run in practice, splits during a race, the amount of running done in a day or week, or any behavior addressed to how to attain a given performance goal. This might also include adequate rest, proper nutrition, and cross training.

Attention and Focus

As much as an athlete might practice a certain routine, the results may not be satisfactory, if he/she is unprepared to deal with distractions. The ability to focus one's attention on the required task is an essential component of performance excellence. Attentional focus can be external or internal. External focus can be broad (viewing the whole track), or narrow (seeing how close the next runner is). Internal focus can be on one's physical sensations, thoughts, or emotions. At different times during competition, each of these may be relevant, and sometimes rapid shifting from one to the other is required. Focusing involves concentration, as well as eliminating distractions in order to direct one's energies to the task at hand. This requires alertness, involvement, and presence, i.e., being right here, right now.

Stress and Anxiety

It is difficult to imagine participating in competition, completely free of stress and anxiety. While in some sports increased arousal is desirable, for the most part the opposite is true. Most athletes perform better when not overloaded by stress, tension, and anxiety. Stress occurs when the demands of a situation exceed athletes' perception of their resources. The result may be tension and anxiety. These can lead to decreased ability to focus and concentrate, impaired coordination and judgment, and diminished self-confidence. Fortunately, methods are available to lessen anxiety before and during performance. The most common of these are the many ways to promote relaxation, i.e., breathing exercises, biofeedback, the use of cue words, and contraction/relaxation exercises.

Coping Skills

Part of preparation for competitive performance consists of developing skills to deal with stress, in order to reduce anxiety to manageable levels. The use of imagery for mental rehearsal is a favorite among elite athletes. It can help improve performance by enabling the athlete to anticipate a favorable sequence of action, as well as to prepare for circumstances that interfere with optimal conditions. Other coping strategies include time-management, control of negative emotions, confidence building, positive self-talk, retraining of negative thinking patterns, and focusing attention in the presence of distractions. Which among these are most useful depends on the experience and personality of the individual athlete, the nature of the stressor, the sport, the time of season, and other factors.

Over-training and Burnout

Some athletes are so driven in their striving for excellence, that they train too much and go too far in their preparation. This could consist of going well beyond recommended levels of training, i.e., too frequently, too intensely, or for too long a duration. Other examples of over-

training include persistence despite important injury, decreased consideration of general health, giving little importance to other interests, or neglecting other people in their lives. This becomes evident in their loss of effectiveness, loss of interest, and dissatisfaction; and may eventually lead to “burnout.” At this point there may be mental exhaustion, withdrawal, irritability, anxiety, depression, and a host of physical symptoms, including loss of appetite, impaired sleeping, lethargy, gastrointestinal symptoms, and a susceptibility to illness or injury. Prevention of these consequences involves early intervention, careful examination of the behavior and its results, as well as thorough review of goals, values, beliefs, and priorities.

Summary

Several important psychological aspects of sport performance have been identified. For each of these, sport psychology can offer methods to enhance an athlete’s performance. Some of these have been mentioned in the topics discussed. The possible interventions have by no means been completely covered. It is also worth repeating that performance enhancement, although the most widely known aspect of sport psychology is only one area of the field. Some of the others were listed in the introductory paragraph.