
BENEFITS OF SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Sports Psychology is a study of athletes and their behaviors in sport contexts and the practical application of that knowledge. Improve Skill Performance: For years sport psychologists have examined how psychological skills training, including mental skills training, help athletes improve performance. Mental skills are procedures that help athletes control their minds efficiently and consistently as they execute sport-related goals. Sport psychology also can help athletes with problems off the court that may affect performance on court. Four Basic Psychological Skills: There are basic psychological skills generally exposed in Sport Psychology - Mental imagery, Relaxation, Self Talk, Goal Setting.

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INTRODUCTION

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 optimize 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.

DEFINITION

Sports Psychology is a study of athletes and their behaviors in sport contexts and the practical application of that knowledge. Sport psychologists identify principles and guidelines that professionals can use to help children and adults participate in and benefit from sport and exercise activities in both team and individual environments. Sport psychologists have two objectives in mind when it comes to sport psychology. First, to understand how psychological factors affect an individual's physical performance and secondly, to understand how participation in sport and exercise affects a person's psychological development, health, and well-being. Sport psychology deals with the increase of performance by the management of emotions and the minimization of psychological effects of injury and poor performance.

IMPROVES SKILL PERFORMANCE

One benefit of sport psychology training is that it enhances performance on the court. Winning is one of the main objectives in tennis, but winning requires consistent performance at a high level. Mental proficiency helps ensure this consistency, guarding against fluctuations in performance. As the game becomes more sophisticated, coaches who fail to properly utilize psychological tools place their players, and themselves, at a disadvantage in performance and satisfaction. For years sport psychologists have examined how psychological skill training, including mental skill training, help athletes improve performance. This not only involves developing skills such as concentration and stress control, but it also includes efforts to influence personal characteristics such as self-esteem and sportsmanship. Sport psychology also can help athletes with problems of the court that may affect performance on court.

FOUR BASIC PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS

There are four basic psychological skills generally exposed in Sport Psychology. Mental imagery, the first psychological skill, consists of five main categories; cognitive-specific, cognitive-general, motivational-specific, motivational-general mastery, and motivational-general arousal. Each skill can serve one or numerous functions, such as motivation or learning a new skill. Relaxation is the second psychological skill s in sport psychology. Relaxation can include unstructured or more structured techniques. Relaxation is considered to be relevant in regulating activation and arousal levels. The final causal network, relaxation may be achieved by listening to calming music, stretching, taking deep breaths, or by arranging a more structured relaxation technique such as progressive muscular relaxation. The third psychological skill is Self-Talk. Self-talk is considered a verbalization phenomenon within many athletes where they are addressing themselves. Self-talk has been shown to have both cognitive and motivational functions. The last psychological skill is Goal-Setting. Outcome, performance, and process are three different types of goals which can influence athletic performance by extracting changes in athletes' levels of focus, attention spans, self- confidence, effort, and motivation.

SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY AND PERFORMANCE ENHANCEMENT

Mental Game Coaching is that the segment of sports psychology that concentrates specifically on helping athletes break through the mental barriers that are keeping them from performing up to their peak potential. Mental game coaching seeks to achieve the overall goal of performance improvement.

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.

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.

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

FIND THE RIGHT ZONE OF INTENSITY FOR YOUR SPORT

Intensity in a broad sense is used to identify the level of arousal or mental activation that is necessary for each person to perform at 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 compete and not getting over-excited.

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.

TO INSTILL A HEALTHY BELIEF SYSTEM AND IDENTIFY IRRATIONAL THOUGHTS

One of the areas which athletes 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.

IMPROVE OR BALANCE MOTIVATION FOR OPTIMAL PERFORMANCE

It is 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. You need to adopt a healthy level of motivation and be motivated for the right reasons.

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 athlete's mentally heal from injuries and deal with the fear of re-injury.

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. Sport psychology may not be appropriate for every athlete. Not every 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. Sports Psychology does apply to a wide variety of serious athletes. Most of the professional athletes are highly committed to excellence and seeing how far they can go in sports. They love competition and testing themselves against the best in their sport. They understand the importance of a positive attitude and mental toughness. These athletes want every possible advantage they can get including the mental edge over the competition.

CONCLUSION

Athletic trainers, physical therapists, coaches, parents, and athletes themselves are all responsible for learning and utilizing the fundamentals of sport psychology. Sport Psychology may help to control anxiety responses, lower the probability of an athlete being put in a choking situation, and most importantly, give an athlete a positive outlook, more self-confidence, effort, and motivation. Each of these assets assist athlete's in the processes of experiencing success.

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