

SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

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 pre-competition 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). (See also Part 2 of this chapter, *Competition Day Preparation*.)

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.

This entire process can be facilitated by a supportive and understanding medical staff. The formula:

Genuine Caring + Skills + Courage = Positive Outcome for the Injured Athlete must be kept in mind by the staff and the athlete, even though progress may be slow and uneven throughout the treatment and recovery process.

Referral to a sports psychologist may be necessary if the athlete is deeply disturbed, or if the injury is severe and a prolonged recovery is anticipated. All injuries involve a certain degree of fear and uncertainty, and the sports psychologist may be great value in helping to deal with this emotion (see Table 5-1 and Table 5-2).

Table 5-1. From common to clinical responses: gauging referrals to therapy.

Temporary Emotional Responses	Ongoing Emotional Patterns
Sadness	Depression
Feeling isolated	Withdrawal
Irritated	Explosive
Neutral	Numb
Unmotivated	Apathetic
Frustration	Frequent crying or emotional outbursts
Anger	Rage
Moderate change in appetite	Rapid weight loss or gain, or disordered eating pattern
Minor sleep disturbance	Insomnia

Table 5-2. Sports psychology consulting with injured athletes: when to make a referral.

Consider referring to a trained, experienced sport psychology consultant if injured athlete:

- Lacks confidence in his/her ability to recover, or to engage in the rehabilitation process.
- Lacks belief in the rehabilitation process.
- Has difficulty filtering out environmental distractions during rehab or training sessions.
- Is withholding effort out of fear (of re-injury, of failure, etc.).
- Loses focus easily when pain intensifies or when discouragement sets in.
- Is engaging in excessive cognitive thinking over simple tasks.
- Is unsure of how to set and attain meaningful goals.
- Has trouble controlling thoughts about the injury, or worries about re-injury.
- Is unable to control negative self-talk.
- Desires to maximise the utility of the rehab and wishes to work more intensely on developing his/her mental game (e.g. improving confidence, concentration, composure, trust).

References

1. Brewer, B. W. Psychology of sports injury rehabilitation. *In Handbook of Sports Psychology* (2nd ed.), R. N. Singer, H. A. Hausenblas, and C. M. Janell (eds.). New York: Wiley, 2001.
2. Heil, J. *Psychology of Sport Injury*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Publishers, 1993.
3. Pargman, D. (ed.) *Psychological Basis of Sport Injuries*. Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology, 1993.
4. Tracey, J. The emotional response to the injury and rehabilitation process. *J. Appl. Sports Psych.* 15(4):279-293, 2003.
5. Webber-Moore, N. Track and field injuries: psychological guidelines for coaches, athletic trainers and athletes. *In The Psychology of High-Performance Track and Field*, R. A. Vernacchia, and T. A. Statler (eds.), pp. 262-273. Mountain View, CA: Tafnews Press, 2005.

ATHLETE'S COMPETITION DAY PREPARATION

Many athletes use special psychological procedures to prepare themselves on competition day. The following exercises will help you develop your own competition-day routine and achieve that hard-to-define sense of “readiness”—it may be a sense of “tingling” or the simple subjective feeling that “this is my day.”

Too high a level of activation is experienced as “stress” or anxiety and leads to muscle tightness, poor efficiency, poor attention or concentration (chaotic thinking or too narrow a focus), and loss of smooth and responsive muscle coordination. Too low a level of activation is seen as low energy, a “flat” performance, little or no motivation, and wandering attention. Both profiles lead to performance errors. How one achieves that sense of readiness that precedes optimum performance varies with each person, so carefully review your best competition days and try to identify the cues (inside of you and in your environment) that seemed to help you prepare to compete well.

A. Identify Your Stress Profile

The next time you experience some type of stress (competition, tests, talking with someone you feel uncomfortable with, etc.), notice how stress affects your body and your mind. Be very specific.

1. Muscles that tighten: Jaw clenches, shoulders tighten, fists clench, stomach tightens, other:
2. Breathing pattern: Shorter and faster, rapid speech, other:
3. Gastro-intestinal responses: nausea or unsettled sensations in the stomach; more frequent bowel movements, other:
4. Other physical signs: Dry throat, upset stomach, cold hands and/or feet, rapid, pounding heart, sweaty palms, frequent urination, other:
5. Interpersonal responses: Rapidity of speech with different people, need to be around certain people (coach, teammate, family, friends, etc.), need to be alone, need to “show them” during warm-up, watching other athletes, other:
6. Personal cues: Mind goes blank (when?), forgetfulness, unable to focus attention well (easily distracted or too narrow a focus), things you say to yourself (I’ve got to do better this time, what am I doing here? I hope my coach/parents don’t get mad if ..., I hope I don’t goof ...), other:
7. Environmental cues: Air temperature, humidity, rain, crowd noises, officials, poor fit of clothes or shoes, equipment problems, other distractions:

Use this information to identify the early signs of stress

Individuals experience stress in consistent ways, and you need to find your own stress profile. Log your responses to stress as well as the cues that were present on your *best* competition days so that you can compare the two profiles.

B. Planning for Competition Day

By now you will have some idea of what your stress profile is: when too much or too little stress is activated, WHAT or WHO triggers the stress, and HOW it affects you (both physically and mentally). Once you know the cues that interfere with your performance, you can plan a programme of psychological and physical techniques to help reach a better performance level. Table 5-3 lists activities that may help you reduce tension, or help you “activate” yourself if you are feeling flat, unresponsive, or “down.”

Be sure to use psychological techniques in your daily training programme. Like any skill, these techniques require practice before you can use them effectively under pressure. Also, be sure to keep a log of techniques and routines that help you on competition day(s).

1. Plan for the night before competition:

You may wish to use mental rehearsal techniques, but don’t use them just before sleep—this is an activation activity, not a relaxation for sleep.

2. Day of competition:

- a. Know your competition schedule, and plan activities such as eating, reaching the competition site, and getting into the locker room so that there is no sense of rushing. Some athletes become more tense if they arrive too early—find the balance that’s right for you. List the time needed to reach the competition site and a schedule you plan to follow.
- b. Every 45 minutes–1 hour check yourself for signs of stress (from A, above) and take a minute to do a body check and use stress management/self-regulation techniques that work for you. List the signs of stress and the specific techniques you plan to use to reduce stress:

If tension is too great for self-control or self-regulation, who (teammate or coach) can help you? How?

Example: Help you check breathing; muscle check; quietly repeat relaxation phrases; place hands gently on your shoulders to help lower them to a more relaxed level; help move away from distracting noises or scenes to a quieter place, etc.

3. Psychological Strategies to Use Before Competition

Internal Muscle Check: Review each muscle group (standing, sitting, or lying down). Hands, arms and fists, forehead, eyes; cheeks and jaw; shoulders and upper back; stomach; hips and lower back, thighs; lower legs and feet.

Breathing Check: Inhale and feel slight tension; exhale and relax from top of head to knees and toes. Feel the relaxation roll down the body. Periodically inhale deeply, hold your breath and feel the tension throughout your body, then relax

Table 5-3. Relaxation and activation techniques.

Purpose	Imagery	Self-phrase	Muscle Relaxation	Brief On-Site Techniques
General relaxation (awake)	Pleasant scene such as favorite activity or place	I feel relaxed, warm, heavy	Try to feel relaxed and heavy by telling each muscle by name to become more and more relaxed while staying awake. Stretch and yawn. Alternate tension and relaxation of each muscle group	Internal muscle scan and check Breathing check and exercise
Sleep	Same as above. Use colour to “flood” awareness. Get rid of worries or distracting scenes	I feel relaxed, warm, serene, calm	Same as above (but move toward sleep)	
Warmth	Serene or active scene of pleasant warmth	I feel the blood flowing through my hands and feet, I feel very relaxed and warm	Couple with muscle relaxation	Small hand-held thermometer. Place hand on forehead; if hand is cooler, increase warmth.
Activation	VMBR*: imagine ideal performance in distance VMBR: experience self doing and rehearsing specific parts of performance VMBR: practice entering the competition with relaxed and alert confidence	Self-phrases tape I feel relaxed, alert, alive, energy is flowing through my body, my arms, my legs. I feel relaxed, yet ready to move quickly and alertly.	Muscle check for relaxation, yet with anticipation of movement	Same as above. Increase heart rate, if it is slow.

*Visual-Motor Behaviour Rehearsal

your jaw, exhale and feel the contrast of the relaxation as it rolls down your body. QUICKLY “scan” your muscles and release any tension you feel. Notice if your breathing is deep or shallow. Deepen it each time so that you can almost FEEL the air “tickle your belly button.” Relax each time you exhale.

Visual-Motor Behaviour Rehearsal (VMBR): Relax as much as possible. Now, as clearly and vividly as possible, imagine yourself in an ideal performance. If you see yourself “in the distance,” add the *feeling of actually experiencing yourself doing the activity*. The difference is feeling alertly relaxed with a very slight sense of muscle activity/tension vs. feeling heavily relaxed. This technique can be used to: 1) rehearse an entire performance; 2) review and correct a specific performance problem so that doing it correctly becomes second nature; 3) practice approaching the crowd or competition with confidence.

4. Four or five hours before the event:

- a. list your objective, e.g. you want to emphasise a fast start, confidence, aggressiveness, a particular strategic approach to the other competitors;
- b. determine how to achieve the objective, e.g. plan to take a moment to visualise a fast start to the gun immediately before getting into the blocks.

5. Immediately prior to the event (before stepping to the line, blocks, or into the ring):

- a. for a second or so, visualise your complete event as you would actually perform; see it happen, make this vivid visualising include the way the body is to feel as it performs;
- b. use an inner frame of reference—you are doing it IN the scene, not watching yourself do it;
- c. clear your mind after you have programmed your body by visualisation.

NOW, let your body take off and do its job automatically.

Reference

Partially adapted from:

1. Suinn, R. M. Body thinking for Olympic champs (appendix B). *In Psychology in Sports: Methods and Application*. Burgess, Minneapolis, 1980.