



information resource, connecting point, and description of services offered by the Sport Psychology concentration for doctoral interns This newsletter is written for coaches, athletes, trainers, advisors and any person interested in the improvement of mental and psychological aspects of performance. In future editions we will feature topics such as goal setting programs, the debate over positive coaching techniques, and team building preseason strategies. Please feel free to link this page and send to a friend or download as written copy and share with others you know. Your comments and reactions are also invited.

KSU Counseling Services - Sport Psychology Center

KSU Counseling Service is one of five University psychological practice centers in the United States that offer a formal concentration for Sport Psychology Interns. The others include: George Washington University, Penn State University, Virginia Tech University, and Washington State University. The Sport Psychology program includes a range of services to athletes, sport teams, and coaches in several aspects of mental performance skills. During the past year we have provided team consultations, topical workshops, credit classes, individual counseling, and assessment of performance skills. Our program offers one of the most complete Biofeedback/Performance Training Centers anywhere. Biofeedback is the use of computerized physiological measures to learn arousal control and focus of attention strategies.

Concepts in Sport Psychology

CRUNCH TIME: CLUTCH OR CHOKE?

The Problem: Athletes frequently encounter competitive situations in which they under perform in skills in which they previously have demonstrated competence. For example, a basketball player is capable of shooting foul shots at an 85% rate in practice and has an average of 75% or better in games. However, he/she suddenly gets into game situations in which he/she shoots no better than 50% and is described as "tight". Similarly, a baseball player may be known as a good hitter with an over .300 batting average suddenly goes into a "slump" in which he cannot make solid contact with the ball. A golfer says she is confident of being able to make shots, yet at address her swing seems to "lock up" at the crucial moment, creating an errant shot.



Former psychology intern, Bob Harmison, with U.S. Snowboard team member, Kelly Clark, during training the day before her gold medal winning run at the 2002 Olympic Winter Games in Salt Lake City

All of these performance activities are attributed to a mental reaction, a thought process, which interferes with the natural capability that the athlete can achieve. Coaches will often describe this as freezing up, clutching, feeling the pressure, being tight, losing confidence, etc. Opposing coaches will actually try to produce the phenomenon by calling time out before crucial free throws by the other team or before the place kicker tries to kick a game winning field goal. In many ways coaches are more adept at creating the pressure in a player than reducing the pressure or relieving the mental triggers.

There are coaches that will simulate competitive environments during practice situations (heightening the noise level in practice, using taunts, etc.) to prepare the athletes for pressure situations, but few know what to do once a case of "the nerves" has arrived. Sometimes the attempt at a solution may even confound the problem. Tactics such as requiring more practice attempts or pulling the participant out of competition may reinforce the thinking that the athlete "has a problem" and confound the mental message that is provoking the undesired response. Similarly, other coaches may try to downplay any response to the athlete hoping to diminish the attention that provokes more anxiety. Again, paradoxically, avoidance is also a form of attention.



One coach who had gone through a game in which a couple of key players were having a “shooting slump” was quoted as saying we “we don’t need a sport psychologist--we just need to go out and do what we are capable of doing”. It seemed implied by the comment that the coach did not want to call undue mental attention by asking for the service of a professional “sport shrink”, a psychologist who works with mental processes because that might be a sign that the problem is significant. The truth is, that for the most part, this area of performance difficulty seems rather mystical or undefined as a phenomenon without an easy prescription or solution. However, this is exactly what a sport psychologist can offer to a coach—an understanding of the dynamics of what happens when a player “down shifts” under competitive pressure and specific methods that can be used to alleviate these situations.

Understanding the Concept of a “slump”, “shaken confidence” and “under-performance”. In order to offer solutions to this area of athlete performance we must first define and understand what is happening to them in terms of the mind/ body connection.

Principle 1: The mind, mental thoughts and reactions, have direct influence on physical behavior and actions.

Our most vivid demonstration of this principle is when we attach physiological sensors called biofeedback to measure the immediate changes, such as muscle tension, heart rate, perspiration, that take place at even the slightest verbal suggestion of an activity, person, or situation. Providing this mirror of very quick and exacting mind-body response heightens the person’s awareness of how dramatic the link can be and how quickly it can change. Even small physiological changes may have a significant impact on performance and subsequent outcome.

The reverse is also true: a physical body behavior can also affect one’s thinking. While we are most interested in the link of response pattern from the mind to the physiological response, it is also true that the link is reciprocal. Responses within the body return to and affect a thought response.

Principle 2: Nearly everybody will experience a situation in which thinking creates a “hiccup” that alters the physical response. It is when the pattern continues and grows that the problem becomes pronounced.

For example, everyone has been known to sneeze because of a sudden irritation. The reflex immediately permeates the body and alters the system for that brief moment. The system then gathers itself and goes back to a normal functioning state. However, if the sneeze could become more continuous, we then believe it is a symptom of a “virus” that starts to alter ones well being over time. The sneeze is just an incidental and accepted snafu, while the virus demands more attention and remediation. Very similar to this analogy is the collective process that creates an athlete’s slump. One setback leads to “trying harder” to compensate, which leads to a physical reaction making the next attempt more difficult. As this spiral continues, we then look at the athlete as having “lost confidence” and entering an on-going pattern of lowered performance. We need to understand the process that creates the shift in the first place, but even more important continues the down spiral in performance.

Principle 3: There are certain performance skills that are more likely to be negatively affected by the mental incident. These areas can be described as activities that require “fine tuning” and “focus”.

Fine-tuning is very similar to the adjustment on a television set, which by being off a very slight turn can make the picture distort. The basic components needed for a television picture may all be in place...color, signal of the picture, sound, etc—however, with the fine-tuning off, a relatively small detail, the picture still becomes unsatisfactory. Other performance skill areas can be unaffected and some may even be enhanced by the mental signal of “the pressure is on, I got to perform”. These tend to be large muscle activities, such as running, lifting, and jumping. So while a person’s foul shooting ability goes down, they will see little if any deficit in their ability to run the floor, jump for rebounds, or play defense.

Principle 4: Sometimes certain athletes are referred to as “prime time” competitors, and may actually thrive and perform better in the clutch. When studying these athletes we can determine that they maintain a high level of resilience and are able to maintain a focus on the immediate situation.

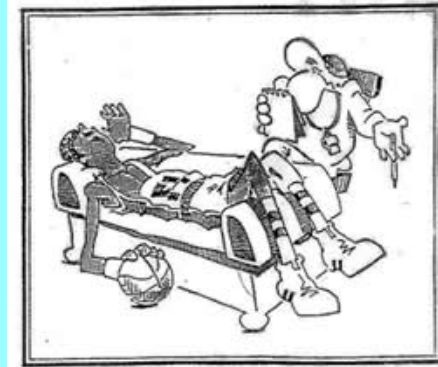


Phil Jackson, the successful NBA basketball coach, emphasizes the act of resilience as the most important quality in a successful player. Resilience in an athlete is to be able to experience an inevitable set back (missed shot, opponent success, an official's call, or even a peak success) and almost immediately refocus to the next play. They do not get caught up in self-criticism or, for that matter, self-congratulations. They stay in the flow of a game as a continually moving forward activity and respond to it naturally without self-conscious reflection. What happened before gets quickly stored as experience (not as wistful regret or worry) and what happens ahead is not the distant outcome but an immediate reaction to the circumstances that are unfolding.

Solutions to the problem: By knowing the dynamics of what is taking place to create the negative performance situation, we are thereby can offer methods to solve the problem. The following are suggestions:

1. *Understand how the mind-body reaction state takes place.* More importantly, realize that you can deliberately alter or control this response pattern. We call this ability self-regulation. The goal of self-regulation is to recognize that physical reactivity, which is usually a stressing or tightening experience, can be managed therefore part of the solution is to understand how physical arousal can be controlled. Most athletes have some strategies that they have utilized over the course of their experience to calm down or psych up. However, very few of these athletes have learned to do this in a very systematic manner with clear knowledge of how to implement these strategies with volition in competitive situations. This ability can be taught to nearly every person.

2. *Recognize that there is a natural inclination, when something "goes wrong," to attempt to solve that situation by what becomes a counter productive response.* That response frequently utilized by many competitive athletes is to try harder. Trying harder usually means putting more pressure and demands on one's self in order to correct the problem with effort. Paradoxically, this increases the tension or anxiety response that is the culprit in preventing one from getting back to homeostasis or natural ability.



Think of the example of a rubber band. A rubber band has considerable elasticity and flexibility. If you hold the rubber band with a minimum amount of tautness between two fingers you will note that you still have flexibility on how that rubber band can be directed or used. However, if you pull the rubber band creating more tautness the tension goes up and the rubber band has less control.

The skill is to not try to solve the problem by working harder, stretching tighter, and thinking more—but instead to relax more, trust instincts, and return to a more natural comfort zone of performance. Besides understanding this concept there are very specific images and instructions that a sport psychologist may use to invoke a more appropriate response with an athlete who is trying too hard. For example, to reduce "white knuckle grip" (holding the club too tightly, preventing the player from "feeling" the shot) have the player imagine the golf club grip is an egg shell which must be held with a certain looseness to prevent breaking.

3. *Another solution that differs from a focus on how to control the physical response is to stop the mental response or thinking process that creates the tension.* There are several strategies that can be used for stopping critical thoughts. One is the use of positive affirmations—self-statements that immediately replace inflicting ideas with affirming ideas. "I am a good foul shooter," "I am strong, I am capable". Another when becoming initially aware of some tension is to use focus and relax commands, "I am calm," "I can relax". Another is to use a personal mantra, a word that serves as a reminder to stay in the moment.

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Mental Training to Increase Team Performance

Just as individual athletes may overcome deficit situations activities can be developed to achieve team goals through practice. The following is an example. Like every skill with high achieving athletes the skill is developed through practice and repetition until one gains the confidence that they can use the skill when the situation calls for it.

A few years ago a noted basketball coach asked for a demonstration of mental management skills with his team. After the demonstration he asked if it was possible to utilize a training process that would attack a very specific team goal that he believed to be mainly a "mental activity". The coach indicated that he felt the team's foul shooting average in the low 60's in competition was well below what these same players were capable. My response was sure, but like any skill of the game, it needed repetition and practice. That night the deal between the coach and the sport psychologist was struck by allotting 14 sessions during the Fall semester in which the entire team was given instruction and practice in the "mental aspect" of shooting a foul shot.

The 14 sessions were organized to achieve three particular goals. Self-regulation to understand and learn to adjust personal arousal levels within a brief time span. The players had 10 biofeedback sessions and reached completion of this activity when they were tested to prove that they could reach a criterion of relaxation followed by arousal demonstrated by moving their skin temperature 5 degrees warmer and 5 degrees cooler in less than one minute. Twelve of the 14 players were able to reach criterion.

The second skill was for each player to establish a pattern of rhythm and focus in preliminary moments of stepping to the foul line, accepting the ball, and preparing for the shots. Players were shown video of successful foul shooters and noted that each one had a set pattern and rhythm to their approach. Typically, they included patterns of breathing, alignment, a set number of bounces, looking at the basket, and pauses. They were told to make their own pattern, but to find a comfortable and acceptable pattern they could be maintained each time they came to the foul line.

The third activity was a demonstration of self-confidence and ability to keep the act simple but focused to the basic mechanics needed for execution. The main training activity for this exercise was to blindfold the players and have them practice 10 shots with a partner who would give them simple feedback as to where the blind shot went and what adjustment in terms of distance or direction they needed to correct the shot. Each player was given the goal to make over half of their foul shots in a 10 shot contest. Over half of the players were able to make 60% of competitive shots (nearly the same as the level they achieved the previous year with eyes open in competition). At the end of that season the team had a foul shooting rate with a better than 12% improvement over the previous year.

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Performance Enhancement Class offered Fall, 2003

A special seminar class, EDCEP 502 Performance Enhancement (2 hours credit) is being offered during the Fall Semester, 2003. This class will have weekly information and skill building sessions on seven topics related to mental aspects of performance. These include goal setting, mental rehearsal, attention and focus, learning and corrective behavior, team coordination, self-regulation of arousal levels, and overcoming self-defeating behaviors. A laboratory utilizing biofeedback training is a weekly option to the content sessions for an additional hour of credit. This class has particular relevance to athletes, although any student may enroll. Permission to enroll may be granted by contacting Fred Newton at 532-6927.

The following are Internet Links for Sport Psychology Information:

- <http://www.aaasponline.org/index2.html>
- <http://www.psyc.unt.edu/apadiv47/links.html>

For further information or comments on Sport Psychology programs contact Fred Newton at newtonf@ksu.edu