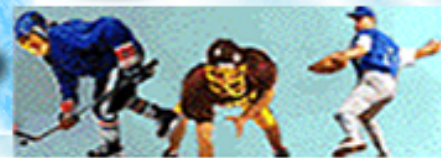




# CHAMPS Newsletter



## Counseling to Help Athletes Maximize Personal Success

[HTTP://WWW.K-STATE.EDU/COUNSELING/STUDENT/SPORTNEWS.HTM](http://www.k-state.edu/counseling/student/sportnews.htm)

FEBRUARY, 2006

### MENTAL PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS & SOLUTIONS!

**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, they suddenly get into game situations in which they start shooting no better than 50% and are 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 they cannot make solid contact with the ball. A golfer says they are confident of being able to make shots, yet their approach during a swing seems to "lock up" at the crucial moment creating an errant shot.

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 a 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 solution may even confound the problem. Tactics such as requiring more practice attempts, pulling the participant out of competition, and similar strategies 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.

A 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 to many and is viewed 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 (such as muscle tension, heart rate, perspiration) to measure the immediate changes that take place at even the 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.

*Vice versa 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 also affect a response in the mind.

*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, 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.

*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 those 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, jumping. So while a person's foul shooting finesse goes down, they will see little if any deficit in their ability to run the floor, jump for rebounds, or play defense.

*Principle 4: Some athletes, sometimes referred to as "prime time" competitors, 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.*

(CONTINUED NEXT PAGE)

### ATHLETES WHO HAVE COMPLETED CHAMPS TRNG

Olympic Medalist:	Professionals:	International Stars:
Kenny Harrison	Mark Simoneau	Anna Pampoulsa
Mitch Richmond	Darren Howard	Korene Hinds
	Ben Leber	Lisi Maurer
<b>National Top 5:</b>	Darren Sproles	Lysaira Romane
Christian Smith	Damian McIntosh	<b>Big 12 All Stars</b>
Amy Mortimer	Tank Reese	Pat Maloney
Terence Newman	Rashad Washington	James Rheame

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**CONSULTATION QUESTIONS FROM COACHES  
ABOUT THE MENTAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECT OF SPORTS  
Fred B. Newton, Ph.D.**

1. How do you overcome mental blocks, slumps, or what is perceived as under performance due to some sort of mental barrier?
2. How can you get athletes to stay "focused", "concentrate" on the task, not make mistakes under game or performance pressures? How do you reduce the pre-performance jitters?
3. How do you develop "team chemistry", teamwork, team communication, or team investment in common goals?
4. How do you assess and understand personality factors such as athletes' attitudes, motivation, learning and behavioral styles?
5. How can self-defeating thoughts be overcome, or self-limiting mental sets, such as what happens during a losing streak for a team?
6. What should be done with injured players? How can they be helped to adjust mentally/emotionally, be motivated to rehab and return, experience themselves as still important part of a team?
7. How can leadership be identified, developed, fostered, nourished with a team? Can personal qualities and attitudes be identified when recruiting an athlete? Can the psychological factors have the same level of objectified measurement such as the physical qualities that are commonly used (speed, strength, size, skills)?
8. How can a balance be made between the *order and structure needs* (discipline, following rules, going with the plan) and the *creativity needs* (ability to adapt, innovate, or make a decision during performance) when the predictable circumstances demand an athlete make decisions and create good choices for unique situations?
9. How can you identify when a player has (mental, physical, social) personal problems often separate from, but typically impacting, sport performance? And what should be done (by the coach or staff) to get the athlete assistance with these problems?

Fred B. Newton, Ph.D.



**Contact Us:** For Team or Individual Services or More Information Please Contact:  
Ksu Counseling Services **CHAMPS@ksu.edu**  
232 English/Counseling Svcs Bldg, 785-532-6972





# CHAMPS Newsletter

## Counseling to Help Athletes Maximize Personal Success

### MENTAL PERFORMANCE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

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, seen as a stressing or tightening experiencing, can be managed. Therefore part of the solution is to understand physical arousal control ability. *Most athletes have some strategies that 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 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 often 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. That is fine if you want to snap someone hard inflicting injury, but not good for a more fine tuned response. *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 the 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. (an example is for a golfer needing to reduce "white knuckle grips" during a crucial shot by imagining the club head is an egg shell which you must hold with a certain looseness to prevent breaking.)* It is important to understand that "trying hard" is an attribute when one is learning a skill. At the learning stage effort, persistence, and repetition are requisite characteristics. However, once the skill is learned and the athlete is at the performance level utilizing characteristics that promote resilience include calmness, self-assurance, and focus in order to maintain positive outcomes.
3. Another solution to control the anxiety response is to uses methods that halt the thinking process that creates the tension. Looking at what went wrong, which we sometimes call "critical thinking", is useful at the evaluative stage of performance. This happens best well after the event or competition when one has time to review performance by looking at video, analyzing charts and stats, and identifying alternative methods for the future. *However, during actual performance this form of self-conscious review takes the individual out of the spontaneous moment that is necessary for immediate successful action. Thought hesitation during or as one anticipates performance may only be useful in slow events such as chess. The pattern that needs to be established is to know when the time is best for critique (usually a left brain function) and when to trust that performance depends upon the more holistic immediate intuitive mind (usually the right brain function). Tim Galway in his books on *Inner Tennis and Inner Golf* explains this concept very well.*

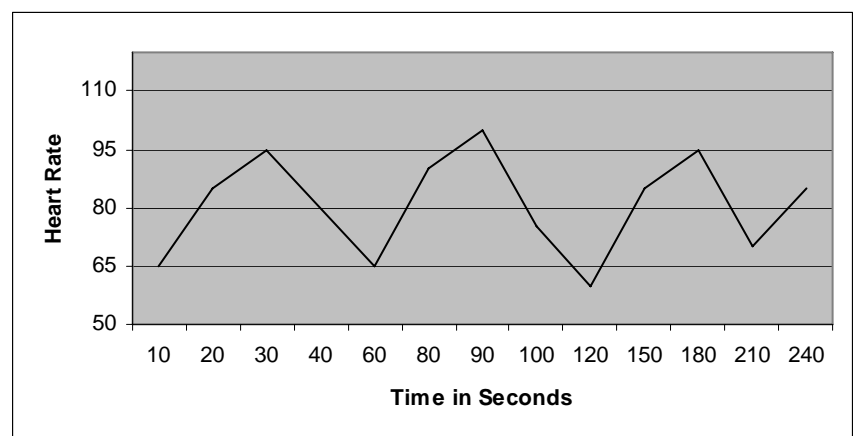
#### CHAMPS STAFF

Fred Newton, Ph.D.	Psychologist/Director, Counseling
Melissa Todd, M.S.	Psychology Intern
Art Rathbun, M.S.	Biofeedback Specialist

4. Like every skill with high achieving athletes, a skill is developed through practice and repetition until one gains the confidence that they can use the skill when the situation calls for it. For example, in basketball one of the few "closed" or highly defined focused activities is the free throw. Since there are few "open" alternatives to standing at a set line and putting the ball through a hoop that is always at the same height and distance it is important that a pre-shot routine and a follow through shot procedure can be identified with strategies for concentration and blocking out mental distractions a key. A player can practice the mental routine until it is automatic and precise.

An example of an athlete staying in "the now" is to watch a high resilience player like Michael Jordan. During a playoff game the Bulls were behind by a single point and Michael took a shot from the top of the key with 15 seconds left in the game. The ball bounced off the rim and into the opponent's hands. There was absolutely no reaction to the shot by Michael except to back peddle as fast as possible on defense. Seconds later he deflected a pass to his teammate and ran parallel down the court. With 3 seconds to play he received the return pass fired up another shot from almost the same spot and won the game. If he would have paused or reacted in any other way during this sequence he would not have been able to make the play, he was strictly playing the game in real time, not observing or reacting to what had already occurred.

At the K-State Performance Enhancement Lab we train athletes to be able to make quick and immediate adjustments in their arousal level. The simplest form or arousal is the flight/fight response or quick activation that can then be followed by cessation of arousal back to calm focus and attention. The graph below is an actual recording of an athlete practicing mental "wind sprints". A wind sprint has a student connected by sensors measuring a physiological response (in this case heart rate). They are commanded to activate for 30 seconds, then to regroup to calm or relaxed state for 30 seconds, followed by 2 additional rounds of activation and recuperation. As shown in this graph this athlete was able to move back and forth from a resting heart rate of 65 bps to 120 bps without leaving their seat.



SUCCESS =

PURPOSE

PASSION

COMMITMENT

RESILIENCE

