



Category: Psychological Training



PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAINING

SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY : MAINTAINING EMOTIONAL CONTROL IN COMPETITIONS

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COMPETITION & EMOTIONAL CONTROL

Here are some pre-performance strategies for taking control of your emotions before they take control of you. Competition can bring out the best or the worst in athletes, and the psychological demands are especially high when individuals or teams are striving to achieve the same goals. When physical skills are evenly matched, it is often the competitor with the stronger mental approach, who can control his or her mind before and during events, who wins. However, many athletes wrongly assume that mental aspects of performance are innate and unchangeable when, in reality, systematic mental training can have a similar impact on performance as physical workouts. Getting into the correct mind-set prior to competition is one of the most crucial aspects of top performance. In fact, a study of Olympic athletes by Ortick and Partington(1) showed that the combination of mental and physical readiness was a key factor that distinguished more successful athletes from their less successful counterparts in the Olympic Games.

TRIGGERS FOR EMOTIONS

Emotions can be defined as brief positive or negative feelings occurring in response to meaningful or important situations, which can influence mood states. Basic emotions such as fear, anger, joy and surprise are commonly experienced in sport, although complex mixes of emotions are often evident. Positive emotions can help sustain motivation and enable us to approach events with enthusiasm and energy. Negative emotions, by contrast, are linked to avoidance behaviours and withdrawal. Emotions in the sporting arena can be triggered by many things personal to an individual, including memories, conversations with other people, seeing the competition venue, weighing up the opposition etc. Researchers have studied emotions in order to determine why they occur and what impact they have on behavior. At first it was thought that emotions were simply the result of physiological changes, since physiological symptoms, such as increased heart rate, were commonly observed in such reactions. To test this theory, scientists injected volunteers with the so-called 'stress' hormone epinephrine (adrenaline) to see if emotions could be generated in the laboratory. A small minority of participants reported feeling genuine emotions (usually sadness) while most reported physiological changes (to be expected after administration of adrenaline) and 'as if' emotions—feelings closely associated with being happy, sad or angry, but not the 'real thing'. Subsequent research demonstrated that emotions could be induced by directing participants' thoughts to emotional triggers, such as deceased relatives (sadness) or past achievements (pride). In summary, research in these areas has shown that both physiological arousal and the cognitive interpretation of that arousal are important in determining the emotional response.

The most important thing to remember is that your interpretation of physiological changes directs your emotional response. However, the relationship between thoughts and emotions works in both directions: although emotions are the result of cognitive interpretations, they can also impact on your thoughts, giving rise to a vicious circle of negative thoughts and emotions. The good news for athletes who experience unhelpful emotions before competition is that you can gain more control by altering your focus of



attention. The next time you feel these unwanted changes occurring try going through the following psychological routine:

1. Tell yourself 'this is my body preparing me to perform well', and repeat the affirmation as necessary;
2. Try to recall an image of yourself either winning or performing well, and connect this with the feelings you experienced at the time.

It is important to challenge the belief of some athletes that emotions and mood states are simply reactions to external events; in fact, the athlete has considerable capacity for control in this area. A recent study by Stevens and Lane identified a number of strategies employed by athletes to regulate their moods.(2) Although unique strategies were employed for specific mood dimensions, results indicated that 'changing location' and 'listening to music' were among the most commonly used strategies.

One of the biggest triggers for anxiety is uncertainty, which is, of course, inherent in all sporting events. The key principle for the athlete is to control the things you can control but not to waste energy on things you can't control. Many top athletes have found, to their cost, that giving attention to how opponents might perform or how technically good others were in the warm-up has a negative impact on their focus. The one thing you can control is your own preparation, so that should have your full focus. By developing consistent routines and ways of coping with distractions, uncertainty can be reduced and you are less likely to be negatively affected by external factors.

PHYSICAL PREPARATION :

The warm-up period can be an important psychological aid as well as preparing the body for the rigors of competition and helping to prevent injury. Remember the comfort zone? By developing a relatively static warm-up routine, including mobility work, stretching and increasing deep muscle temperature, uncertainty can be reduced and the athlete's attention directed to appropriate cues, such as quality technique and body awareness. The development of routines in sport has consistently been shown to be important in directing attention focus to important cues, so aiding performance.

Golfers have routines that allow them to prepare in the same way for each shot, as do some rugby place kickers, and tennis players before serving. The key to any routine is that provides the athlete with control and directs attention to the important cues and the sequence in which these should occur. Such routines are the opposite of superstitious rituals that take control away from the performer, as with superstitions outcome is essentially believed to be controlled by sources other than the self.

Mental Preparation

The mental aspects prior to performance should involve focusing on what you are going to do during the event. This can include specific strategies, and the establishment of optimal attention focus. Some athletes will like to use imagery to recall positive past experiences and generate a sense of confidence. Imagery is a very flexible method to employ prior to competition but it needs to be used correctly for maximum effect. Imagery is not just a form of visualization, but it needs to be used correctly for maximum effect. Imagery is not just a form of visualization, but moreover an all sensory experience that should involve the kinaesthetic sense, emotions and auditory experiences to increase the impact. Many people use imagery to simply see themselves winning but it can be employed to imagine good technique, coping with difficult situations, recreating emotional feelings and rehearsing the up-coming event in the mind. Imagery is a powerful technique since the brain interprets the imagined scenarios very literally, so directly enhancing such psychological variable as confidence.

THE 'QUICK SET' ROUTINE

Psychologist Jeff Simons has described one of the best ways to organize the last 20-30 seconds before competition in what has become known as the quick set routine. (4) This three-phase routine is



designed to provide a quick focus that can be used just before competition or as a means of refocusing quickly following a distraction. It is minimal in content, which appeal to many athletes, and involves a physical, emotional and focus cue. An example for a sprinter could be :

1. Close eyes, clear you mind and maintain deep rhythmical breathing, in through your nose and out through your mouth (physical cue);
2. Imagine a previous race win, see yourself crossing the line first and recreate those feelings (emotional cue);
3. Return your focus to the sprint start, thinking of blasting off on the 'B' of the bang (focus cue)

However meticulous your planning, things often occur at the competition site that are out of your control. Such events have the potential to impact on your emotional state, distract you from your goals and push you out of optimal state of preparedness. However, it is important to remember that things only become distractions if you let them. They do not have to negatively influence your mood if you can learn to let them go and refocus. Such distractions can be provided by your opponents. It is increasingly common for opponents to use psych-out strategies or mind games to try and break your concentration and consistency.

Remember that some opponents are actively seeking to unsettle you, and that by reacting to their comments or behaviours you are falling into their trap and allowing them the psychological edge. By engaging in this psychological duet you run the risk of disrupting your emotional state, becoming over-aroused and suffering a catastrophic decline in performance that is difficult to recover from quickly. Reacting emotionally often means that you discard your carefully laid plans and operate a strategy of reprisal. Self-control is best regained by not reacting to provocation.

There are many other potential distractions for the athlete, including the actions of friends or family, coaches or team mates, the environmental conditions, memories, delays and irrelevant thoughts. All of these can detract from your preparations, so be ready to clear your mind and refocus as necessary. Additionally/alternatively, remove yourself physically from the source of these distractions if possible. Learning any physical skill takes time, effort and practice. Psychological skills are no different in this respect, so don't expect miraculous overnight changes in your performance. If you are a serious athlete, it is best to work with your coach to devise routines and mental plans. Once you are happy with these, they can be introduced first to practice situations and later to competition. Give yourself a few weeks to use these new techniques before re-evaluating them and adding or deleting parts as necessary.

Emotions are an essential part of sport and competition, but if you don't gain control of them before competing they might control you and hinder your performance. While it is true that some people are more emotionally sensitive than others, taking mental charge by implementing psychological plans and routines can help all athletes to a more optimal state of readiness for performance.