



THE UNDERLYING PSYCHOLOGY IN SPORTS

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Abstract

According to Division 47 of the American Psychological Association, sports psychology encompasses a range of topics including "motivation to persist and achieve, psychological considerations in sport injury and rehabilitation, counselling techniques with athletes, assessing talent, exercise adherence and well-being, self-perceptions related to achieving, expertise in sport, youth sport and performance enhancement and self-regulation techniques."While popular perceptions often presume that sports psychology is only concerned with professional athletics, this specialty area includes a broad range of scientific, clinical and applied topics involving sports and exercise. There are two key areas of interest in sports psychology: understanding how psychology can be applied to improve motivation and performance and understanding how sports and athletics can improve mental health and overall well-being.

Keywords: Sports Psychology, Athletics, Exercise, Performance.

Introduction

"Life is just like a sport; so win it."

Sport requires not only an immense amount of physical ability and toughness, but because of the associated psychological demands, inherent danger of injury, and uncertain competitive outcomes, it also requires a certain amount of mental toughness. Participation in competitive athletics can overwhelm many athletes and lead them to feel unprepared to perform. As a result, many athletes experience anxiety, depression and fear (Tracey, 2003). These emotions can inhibit performance and lead to negative outcomes such as injury or loss of playing time. In order to deal with these negative experiences, some athletes choose to seek the services of a counselor or sport psychology professional: however, many athletes who experience these negative emotions do not seek treatment from a mental health professional. Potential reasons for not seeking treatment could include lack of availability and the potential stigma attached to psychological treatment (Tracey, 2003). Sport psychology is typically considered a sub-discipline of both the psychological and sport sciences (Harmison, 2000).

Sport psychology is an interdisciplinary science that draws on knowledge from many fields including biomechanics, physiology, kinesiology and psychology. It involves the study of how psychological factors affect performance and how participation in sport and exercise affect psychological and physical factors. In addition to instruction and training of psychological skills for performance improvement, applied sport psychology may include work with athletes, coaches, and parents regarding injury, rehabilitation, communication, team building, career transitions and much more. Sports psychologists may also choose to specialize in a particular area. Some examples of major specialties within this field include:

- Applied sports psychology focuses on teaching skills to enhance athletic performance such as goal setting and imagery.
- Clinical sports psychology involves combining mental training strategies from sports psychology with psychotherapy to help clients who suffer from mental health problems including eating disorders and depression.
- Academic sports psychologists teach at colleges and universities and also conduct research.

Many sport psychologists believe that engaging in rapport enhancing interviews help to improve athletes' perceptions of psychological intervention (Donohue, Dickens, Lancer, Covassin, Hash & Miller et al. 2004). This type of interview often educates the athlete about the process of sport psychology consultation indirectly or directly through questions asked by the athlete or statements made by the psychologist (Donohue et al., 2004).

The level that an athlete performs on any given day depends on five main things. These are - **physical skills**, and **mental skills**, **level of technical skill**, **strategic awareness**, and **chance**. "Chance" is all those variables that are not under the athlete's control, such as the weather and how good the opposition is. As there are always some uncontrollable things in sports, performance is left up to chance to some extent. One way that sports psychologist's help athlete return from injury is to use visualization; as famous sportsman Muhammad Ali said "**The man who has no imagination has no wings**". Otherwise known as imagery, visualization works by an athlete visualizing him or her scoring the goal, hitting the hole-in-one, or scoring that touchdown. Visualizing also helps to control and strengthen the nerve pathways inside the brain so that when that at times one will have complete control over one's feelings and reactions at any such a pressure-filled time. An athlete doesn't have to be injured to practice visualization. It can be used when you are physically tired, or do not want to tire yourself before a big game. When weather is too bad to train or when you do not have the time to practice a particular skill



Physically. Visualization will only work if the athlete presents a clear image in the mind and if the athlete is a willing participant. When visualizing one should use all of the body's senses (eyes, ear, nose, skin and tongue). When the focus of rehabilitation is exclusively on physical healing "the psychological experience of being injured and the numerous thoughts, feelings, and behaviours associated with an injury" tend to be ignored or devalued (Tracey, 2003, p. 280). Thus, the number of athletes returning to competition before they are mentally ready is on the rise (Podlog&Eklund, 2005).

Sports psychologists seek to understand what sets elite athletes apart, as well as how they cope with the pressure and stress of a competitive lifestyle. Specifically, researchers have studied how elite athletes manage transitions (such as during the Olympics), how they maintain balance between life and athletics, and what they do to prepare for competitions. Sports psychology researchers examine not only individual factors in athletic performance, but also what makes a team successful. At a team level, researchers are interested to examine cohesion in both a social and task-oriented sense, and the impact of those factors on performance. For example, does a team that meshes well socially perform better in competition? Research has also focused on identifying team-building strategies that lead to success.

In our society today it seems like sports rule the land. Everywhere we look; there is some kind of sporting event going on or being televised. Almost everyone could be considered a fan of at least one sport. Some people follow sports like a religion and the sportsperson like God (example: Sachin Tendulkar in Cricket). With such an increased focus on sports, the athlete's performances are put under a microscope. This puts more pressure on athletes to give a winning performance. No longer do athletes play for fun, they play to win. This isn't happening just on the professional level; it is happening on all levels of sport. From little league to backyard football, the goal is to win at all cost. With this increase pressure, athletes are looking for more and more ways to better their performance. One such way, which is now gaining popularity, is sports psychology. Though this isn't a new field, its popularity is just beginning to take off. So, psychology forms an important part of sports now days.

“Champions aren't made in the gyms. Champions are made from something they have deep inside them – a desire, a dream, and a vision.”

- *Muhammad Ali*

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