Are You Coaching Mental Skills? Why Not?

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Introduction:
Across all levels of the athlete continuum, from youth through professional sports, psychological preparation is as essential to success as physical conditioning, adequate hydration and proper nutrition. For many athletes psychological barriers impede performance as well as the ability to enjoy otherwise meaningful experiences. Since the early 1980s sport psychologists have stressed the importance of psychological or mental training through research in areas such as concentration, motivation, imagery, and mental toughness. It is apparent, within our small sample group, coaches across all NCAA divisions in which we interviewed feel the development of mental skills is an important contributor to overall athletic performance. Each coach felt that mental skills were as important to develop in athletes as physical skills. Moreover 80% of coaches mentioned that the overall performance of their athletes is related to their ability to focus under pressure.

Question 1: Do you feel that mental skills are important to develop in your athletes? If so, how important do you feel these skills are? 100% of the participants agreed that mental skills are important in an athlete, and are very important or vital to their programs. Each coach felt that mental skills were as important to develop in athletes as physical skills. Moreover 80% of coaches mentioned that the overall performance of their athletes is related to their ability to focus under pressure.

Question 2: Do you work with your team in an attempt to develop their mental skills? 9% of the coaches (2 out of 22) responded that they work with their mental skills.

Question 3: Why do you feel that coaches in general do not spend enough time on developing mental skills? 100% of participants provided the same two reasons for not spending more time on developing mental skills. The first was due to NCAA time restrictions and the second was due to a general lack of knowledge or comfort level in providing mental skills training.

Question 4: Do you feel a program designed to develop mental skills for your athletes would be useful to your program? 100% of participants agreed that a mental skills development program would be beneficial as long as it would not be time-prohibitive.

Question 5: If a program were designed to take no more than 15 minutes a week, would you consider adding it to your practice time? 100% of participants agreed if a program took no longer than 15 minutes a week they would add it to their practice regime.

Conclusion:
It is apparent, within our small sample group, coaches across all NCAA divisions in which we interviewed feel the development of mental skills is an important contributor to overall athletic performance. Each coach interviewed indicated that mental skills were important for their athletes to possess yet only 9% (2 out of 22) responded that they made a deliberate attempt to develop mental skills with their team or individuals on their team. These findings are in line with those of Gould, Hodge, Peterson and Petlichkoff (1987) and indicate a need for the development of those skills.

Based on additional feedback, coaches cite the lack of knowledge and time restrictions as primary impediments toward the development and implementation of mental skills training. Time restrictions in particular make it challenging for coaches and/or program developers to design a comprehensive mental skills pro-
gram. Yet, many coaches suggested that a pre-designed program, which included 10 to 12 sessions of 15 to 20 minutes of mental training per week, could be implemented.

In conclusion, it appears a short, focused mental skills training program can be implemented into typical practice routines and schedules. Even though short sessions would by no means substitute for a comprehensive mental skills program, they provide a distinct opportunity to finally implement important mental skills training into practice sessions. Furthermore, findings from this study also support those of Bull, Shamrock, James and Brooks (2005) who indicated coaches need an integrated coaching team (from skill development, to conditioning to psychology) to assist in the selection and implementation of the most comprehensive training program for athletes.

References:


