Olympic Coaching Psychology: Winning Strategies for All Athletes

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INTRODUCTION

Athletic performance is mainly determined by technical, physical and psychological factors, but technical and physical abilities are stable elements that will not change or fluctuate within a short period of time. Hence, a determining factor of an athlete's performance in competition is the athlete's psychological state. For example, a soccer team has to practice for four years for the Olympic competition, but one mistake in a critical game could determine the fate of the team. The psychological pressures on athletes during the Olympic Games are tremendous. During a warm-up, the audience usually has a hard time predicting which athlete will win an upcoming competition because all athletes demonstrate their perfect performance routines without any flaws. But, many athletes in competition may fail to reach their athletic potential because of psychological pressures. Thus, becoming a winner in competition depends largely on an athlete's psychological control (Wang & Goldfine, 2008). Coaches and athletes are starting to recognize the effect of psychology on athletes' performance, and they are trying eagerly to learn more about the techniques and skills of psychological training for athletes' success in competition (Morris, Spittle, & Perry, 2004; Murphy & Martin, 2002).

From a psychological perspective, two original sources affect an athlete's psychological state in competition: (1) negative internal thoughts or (2) negative external stimuli. Every athlete has thoughts, and some athletes focus on their positive strengths, abilities or athleticism; thus, they are looking forward to competing without the fear of losing. These athletes are high achievers who can usually take good control of their psychological states in competition (Atkinson, 1974; McClelland, 1961). Conversely, other athletes might focus on the negative sides of their techniques, skills or abilities. As a consequence, they tend to be afraid of losing and project negative outcomes of the competition; these athletes have great trouble taking control of their psychological well-being in competition (Wang, Callahan, & Goldfine, 2003).

Another reason that causes some athletes to lose their psychological control is their lack of control over external negative stimuli, such as seeing opponents’ perfect routines in warm-ups, looking at the scoreboard, hearing audience noise, reacting to coaches' negative criticisms, receiving teammates' blame in competition. All of the above external negative stimuli can heighten an athlete's anxiety in competition if an athlete is unable to convert these external negative stimuli to positive thoughts. Many types of external stimuli can make athletes anxious. Athletes that can transform these negative external stimuli to positive thoughts or block these stimuli may be able to enter an optimal psychological state for peak performance.

Many psychological strategies can be used to mentally prepare athletes ready for competition. Some strategies are more effective than others, but coaches and athletes should use the most effective psychological skills for peak performance. The following three psychological skills have been shown to be effective and have been used for many years by the author, who has helped athletes win Olympic gold and silver medals. With repeated practice of these three psychological skills, athletes can control their psychological states for the success of competition.

STRATEGIES FOR PEAK PERFORMANCE

Building Self-confidence

Building an athlete's self-confidence probably is the most vital psychological strategy any athlete could have. Hays, Maynard, Thomas, and Bawden (2007) have identified nine sources of confidence: preparation, performance accomplishments, coaching, innate factors, social support, experience, competitive advantage, self-awareness and trust. The following five ways can help athletes enhance their self-confidence. With consistent and effortful practice, athletes' self-confidence can be significantly enhanced.

Desktop Theory

The desktop theory (Robbin, 1986) perceives an athlete's confidence as a desktop that should be lifted. How can a desktop be lifted? The only way is to add the legs to the underneath of the desktop so that the desktop can be lifted, which indicates that self-confidence is lifted. What are the legs of the desk? Legs indicate how athletes perceive their own strengths. In other words, the more strength athletes perceive they possess, the more legs the desktop has. A desktop with 20 legs would be more solid support for the desk. Consistently, if athletes perceive themselves with more strength, they have more solid self-confidence. Many times athletes might not be aware of all their own strengths, so coaches should let them know how many strengths they possess to build self-confidence. Heinrichs (2008) once stated that a few international women's soccer teams had better skills than the U.S. Women's Soccer Team, but our team beat these international teams every time because our athletes believed they were a better team. Such confidence has made the team champions of the World Cup and the Olympics. The use of the desktop theory can effectively lift athletes' self-confidence with the best result, but the central issue of using this theory is that coaches and athletes must have a comprehensive understanding of each athlete's overall strengths, and the athletes should regularly remind themselves of these positive traits they possess.

Goal Setting

Athletes' self-confidence also relies on their athletic successes. The more successful experiences athletes have, the greater self-confidence they possess (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). Thus, coaches should help an athlete set proper, realistic, achievable and challenging goals. Also, process goals (how to shoot the basketball, how to pass the ball or how to take off) should be emphasized. Goal setting is an individual matter, so coaches should set goals for athletes based on their skill level, motivation, experience and other related factors. Also, both long- and short-term goals should be set so that the athlete knows what to work on. With a positive record of successful experience, athletes can enhance their self-confidence. If an athlete's skill level is not that good, the coach can focus on goal-setting with the mechanics of skill improvement, instead of looking at the result. Once an athlete makes the improvement of skill mechanics, the process goals have been reached.

Positive Reinforcement by Coaches

Ultimately, self-confidence is the athletes' perception of how they perceive their own ability. In fact, a perceived ability of self-strengths is a subjective matter and such perceptions can be cultivated from different perspectives (Frey, Lagnu & Pavizza, 2003). For example, an athlete can compare improvement between performances; focus on the ability to correct wrong skills; compare themselves with a weaker opponent, or focus on the positive feedback from coaches or others. Because perception of self-confidence is subjective, coaches should regularly give positive reinforcements to athletes to help them cultivate a perception of being accomplished at something. There are various means of giving positive reinforcements such as verbal praise, nonverbal expressions (smile, pat an athlete’s back, nodding the head), awards, more playing time and trophies. Coaches have the ultimate authorities to make many decisions, and coaches' positive reinforcements have a profound effect on athletes' self-confidence. Coaches should use positive reinforcements wisely and frequently, especially for those athletes who are lacking self-confidence.
Psychological Comparison Technique

Another ingredient of self-confidence is to compare athletes’ ability with their opponents. If athletes believe they are more talented than their opponent, their self-confidence will be bolstered. With this principle in mind, coaches must teach athletes to learn proper comparison techniques. Athletes always should compare their own strengths to an opponent’s weaknesses; such a comparison provides great comfort for an athlete challenging an opponent. Every athlete has unique strengths and weaknesses. If an opponent’s weaknesses are focused or visualized, the athlete becomes confident for the upcoming competition. Conversely, if athletes compare their weaknesses with an opponent’s strengths, the athlete’s anxiety level will be significantly heightened.

ATTENTION CONTROL FOR ELIMINATING COMPETITIVE ANXIETY

Eliminating Negative Thoughts with Proper Attention

Two original sources of competitive anxiety are internal negative thoughts and external negative stimuli. According to Wang (2006), the psychological mechanics of competitive anxiety is as shown in Figure 1.

From this model, it is clear that an athlete must eliminate negative thoughts in competition in order to pull out the roots of the competitive anxiety. According to Thomas, Hanton and Maynard (2007), negative performance thoughts before competition increase. These thoughts are worries, anxieties, apprehensions, doubts, lack of confidence and frustrations. Without having the ability to cope effectively with their own mental state, athletes won’t be able to achieve peak performance in competition. The good news is that the athletes’ thoughts are under their voluntary control and the athletes can manipulate their thoughts freely. Thus, an athlete must know which thoughts are preferred and which should be eliminated. The following are guidelines of how an athlete should control his or her thoughts in order to eliminate competitive anxiety before or during competition.

Recommended Thoughts Before Competition

• Focus on your previous successful experiences.
• Focus on your perfect skill movements.
• Focus on the opponents you have beaten before.
• Focus on your strengths.
• Focus on the process of the competition.
• Focus on the skill movements or strategies you are going to play.
• Focus on positive comments coaches have given to you.
• Focus on the teamwork you are going to work on.
• Focus on the opponents’ weaknesses.
• Focus on your enjoyable experiences.

Thoughts that Should Be Eliminated

• Don’t focus on athletes’ previous mistakes.
• Don’t focus on athletes’ previous failing experience.
• Don’t assume you are not feeling well right now.
• Don’t overestimate opponents’ ability.
• Don’t over-perceive the importance of upcoming competition.
• Don’t focus on opponents’ strengths.
• Don’t project the outcome of the competition.

Converting Negative External Stimuli to Positive Thoughts

The second effective psychological strategy is to convert negative external stimuli into positive thoughts. There are countless external stimuli, such as audience’s noise, coaches’ criticism, scoreboard, teammates’ complaints, opponents’ excellent performance, a new competition site. All these external stimuli can negatively affect athletes’ psychological state and heighten anxiety levels. To convert these external stimuli into positive thoughts, an athlete can do is to restructure thinking process. For example, when the coach criticizes athletes for being unprepared for upcoming competition, they can internalize the coach’s criticism as a cause of their success. Consistently, a teammate’s complaint could be interpreted as a teammate’s effort to achieve the team success. Through mental practice, athletes can convert any negative external stimuli into positive thoughts for achieving an optimal psychological state. Thus, psychological skills are crucial for facing negative external stimuli which are out of control by an athlete. With a swift use of this mental skill, an athlete can encounter any challenges at any competition situations.

MENTAL IMAGERY STRATEGIES

Mental imagery is a process of stimulation without actual external stimuli. Such a mental stimulation can help athletes accomplish various goals. An athlete can engage in mental imagery to eliminate competitive anxiety, maintain technical routines after an injury, reinforce skill movements, learn new skills, etc. Murphy, Jowdy, and Durschi (1990) found that 100 percent of the sport psychology consultants at the United States Olympic Training Center and 90 percent of the athletes at this center indicated that they used some forms of mental imagery. The following mental imagery rehearsals could help athletes accomplish various goals in competition or training settings.

Use Mental Imagery to Eliminate Competitive Anxiety

One of the major uses of mental imagery is to eliminate competitive anxiety and obtain the optimal psychological state in competition. The causes of competitive anxiety are either from internal (negative thoughts) or external stimuli (e.g. audience’s noise, coaches’ criticism). In order to eliminate competitive anxiety, athletes can engage in mental imagery training to watch competition videos, visualize the true competition situations by integrating visual cues, auditions and kinesthetic sensations. During the process of an imagery practice, the competition-related situations stimulate the athletes’ brain, and these stimuli will initially trigger and enhance athletes’ anxiety levels without experiencing actual competition situations. With repeated mental rehearsals of such processes, the athletes will get used to the competition-related stimuli. In the future, when competing in real competitions, these athletes would have already been very familiar with real competition situations in their brains so that the athletes’ competitive anxiety will be effectively controlled. During the process of imagery training, athletes must integrate visual, audition, kinesthetic, coenesthetic sensations to their imagery process in order to get realistic feelings related to competition situations. With a determination and regular mental imagery practice, athletes can effectively eliminate competitive anxiety and obtain an optimal psychological state.

Use Mental Imagery for Injury Recovery

Sports injuries happen often in the athletic arena, and some athletes’ injuries may not heal quickly. With a long-term absence from technical training, an injured athlete could gradually lose the traces of skill routines in their brains; as a result, the athlete is unable to reach his/her athletic potential in competition or is unable to compete at all. Therefore, how an injured athlete maintains technical routines after an injury becomes a major issue of training. Mental imagery has been shown to be an effective way of helping injured athletes maintain their technical routines.
Good Coaches Adjust (continued from page 36)

I V. 1 – 3 STAGES
Coach shows all three 1 v 1 games to players and then explains that they will play for 4 minutes each time. They are not allowed to play the same 1v1 game two times in a succession. That means that the players have to organize and communicate with each other the way they play 1v1 will take place next. Additionally the same team can not attack two times in a row.

This 1v1 environment, in addition to addressing the three 1v1 scenarios of driving at a defender, turning to beat a defender and driving away from a trailing defender, ensures that players have to organize and communicate within small groups to maximize their level of play within each four minute segment.

3 V. 3 – STREET SOCCER – PLAYERS IN CHARGE
Organize two or three 3 v. 3 fields side by side placing three balls behind each goal and telling the players they are responsible for a) picking the teams b) deciding on the rules c) refereeing the games d) changing the teams every 12 minutes.

It is essential that the coach resists all temptations to solve disputes or problems rather just observe how long it takes the players to sort things out.

I have used both of the practices above with young travel teams from the Rockville Center Soccer Club in New York and have been both astounded and pleased with the way they have been received.

I have attempted to crystallize some of the many issues that I believe any concerned youth coach must consider. We do not coach in a vacuum. The players we are attempting to teach the beautiful game are so greatly affected by the things I have noted, that we must react. If we are to truly create coaching environments, we need to get creative quickly.

Diagram 1 – 1 v. 1,3 Stages

Diagram 2 – 3 v. 3 Street Soccer, Players in Charge

while an injury is healing. For example, an injured gymnast could engage in mental rehearsal by executing technical routines with quality and quantity of mental practice similar to actual skill training. Such mental rehearsals provide the athletes the opportunity to reinforce and strengthen the technical blueprints on their brain so they will not lose the neuro-muscular sensations of the skill routines. Athletes have used mental imagery to effectively maintain skill routines to compete in high-level competition for peak performance. To be effective, injured athletes must believe in the positive impact of mental imagery so that they have the determination, commitment and consistency of engaging in mental imagery training during the time of injury recovery. Coaches also should be strong advocates to encourage their athletes to engage in mental imagery training.

CONCLUSION
Psychological strategies play a significant role in an athlete’s success. Athletes can choose many psychological strategies to obtain optimal psychological states in competition, but the imperative issue is which psychological strategies should be chosen to benefit athletes. This paper introduced three effective mental skills so that athletes and practitioners can root out competitive anxiety and reach the optimal psychological state in competition. These psychological skills have been used repeatedly by professional and amateur athletes at all levels and have been proved to be winning strategies. Ultimately, athletes' success starts from their minds and by using the above mental skills, athletes will prevail in athletic arena.

References