

Sports Psychology Intro

Psychological training, along with physical and skills training, has an important role to play in improving athletic performance.

Here's an introduction into sports psychology terms and concepts. These subjects are covered in more detail in later articles.



CYCLE HANDOUT

Motivation

Motivation is something that causes a person to act. It is the ability to focus on a goal and work toward that goal, regardless of physical ability. It is willpower.

Motivation has two important elements: direction and intensity. *Direction* is the choice of goal. *Intensity* is how energized the individual is toward that goal. Intensity, which is related to psychic energy, is influenced by emotion.

Reinforcement

Reinforcers are events following a response that change the probability that this response will be made again when the same situation recurs.

In athletes:

Positive reinforcers increase the likelihood or frequency of positive behaviors; *negative reinforcers* decrease the likelihood or frequency of negative behaviors.

Positive reinforcers—the carrots—include praise, trophies, recognition, money, and feelings of accomplishment.

Negative reinforcers—the sticks—include ridicule, embarrassment, and punishment.

Extinction

This refers to the disappearance of a habit by removing the reinforcement.

Frustration

This is the psychological term that describes the failure to reach an expected goal or reward.

Confidence

Confidence is the realistic expectation of success or of achieving one's goals. It's what athletes reasonably hope to do, not what they dream of achieving. Confident athletes are prepared. Confident athletes accurately judge their abilities and have appropriate goals.

Confidence about future performance is based upon past performance. Confidence is an expression of one's perceived self-worth. Confidence in sport is related to past experiences within and outside of sport.

Confidence is *general* and *specific*. An important characteristic of confident athletes is their general belief in their ability to become competent.

Psychic Energy

This is the drive or activation of the mind. It has *intensity* and *direction*. It can be positive (excitement, happiness, motivation) or negative (anxiety, irritability, anger, fear)

Watching television or stuffing envelopes is associated with low psychic energy. Performing in front of an audience or test taking requires high psychic energy. When going from low to high arousal, athletes get *psyched up*. When psychic energy is misdirected or too intense athletes are *psyched out*. Athletes want to get *up* but not *up-tight*.

Arousal

Arousal is alertness, consciousness, excitation or excitability, responsiveness, vigilance, or wakefulness. It results from non-specific sensory excitation. (Specific sensory excitations are considered to be direct routes from eye, ear, or skin.) The arousal center is below the brain, in the brainstem.

Arousal refers not only to psychic energy, or mental activation, of a person, but also the physiological and behavioral manifestations. Examples of physiological manifestations include high heart rate, increased breathing rate, change in skin electrical conductivity, widened pupils, and piloerection (hair standing on end).

Continued

Flow

Being in *flow* is being in an arousal state—intensity and direction—that is just right.

Focus

Focus, or attention, may be *external* or *internal*, *narrow* or *broad*.

External focus is attention directed outside the body. Internal focus is attention directed inward.

Narrow focus is restricted; wide focus, like peripheral vision, takes in a large field of view.

The ability to shift and hold focus is a critical element that separates champion athletes from beginners.

Affirmations

Positive, upbeat self-talk words or phrases help many athletes. Sometimes self-talk helps replace negative thoughts in difficult situations.

Imagery

Mental imagery uses visualization (picturing images) and other senses—for example imaging sounds or smells—to improve performance.

Pain

Pain refers to two things:

- (1) A type of sensory event
- (2) An emotional reaction or state

Scientists classify some sensory nerve fibers that travel toward the central nervous system as “pain” fibers. Physiologically, when these fibers are stimulated, a pain event is occurring.

Although pain fibers may be stimulated, not everyone experiences the sensation as pain.

On one hand, modern athletes know “no pain, no gain,” and “pain is weakness leaving the body,” are obsolete training mantras. Pain in training is often unnecessary, and pain in competition should not be overwhelming, intolerable, or constant.

On the other hand, it is unreasonable to say that successful athletes don’t regularly experience pain or unpleasant sensations.

Athletes benefit from learning how to manage pain effectively.

General Sport Psychology Hints

- Rituals are okay, avoid superstitions.
- When you decide to make an action, do so decisively.
- Take control, do not be intimidated.
- Know when to rest—physically and psychologically.
- Open yourself to possibilities, rather than

- think things are impossible
- Think of yourself as a winner.
- You never lose if you see each result as a step towards achieving your goals.
- Don’t give up.
- Rise to the occasion.
- Target what you want vs. what you get.
- Familiarization with a course lessens the need for distracting thoughts.
- Think positively. “Everything is great.” Admittedly, sometimes you might need to find a context or silver lining for this to be true.
- Whether sun, rain, wind, or calm, there is an opportunity for success.
- Balance taking care of your own preparations, vs. allowing others to help you.
- Reinterpret pain as the sensation of becoming fitter or succeeding.
- Believe in self and magic.

Three Questions

Before spending mental energy ask yourself these questions.

1. Is it under my control?
e.g. Hills? NO, they are fixed. Competitors’ fitness or bike equipment? NO.
2. Is it happening now?
e.g. Don’t worry about a crash last year, a flat you don’t have.
3. Will it affect performance?
e.g. Rider ahead of you in a time trial is usually irrelevant.

Don’t spend mental energy unless the answer to one of these questions is YES.

Keep Perspective

“When Bernard Hinault (5-time winner of the Tour de France) was in New York years ago, a magazine editor asked him, ‘what psychological psych-ups do you use before a race? Do you imagine the race or hear voices telling you to psych up?’ Hinault rolled on the bed—I’m not kidding you—for twenty minutes just laughing.”

—Greg LeMond quoted by Bill Strickland in *The Quotable Cyclist*.

Although sports psychology can be helpful to athletes, and can improve performance, keep in mind that the psychological issues that face most athletes are often the same ones that affect the general population. These include concerns about family, general health, and income; substance abuse; and anxiety and depression. **AB**