

# Psychological Preparation for Peak Performance in Sports Competition

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## Abstract

This paper attempt to make an overview of various techniques, sport psychologist adopt in psychological preparation of athletes for peak performance. To attain peak performance in sports competitions, coaches and athletes should not base their prospect on physical training on sport skills alone rather should integrate both the mental and physical aspects of performance. During sport competitions athlete should enter the competition with the proper mindset so as to achieve optimum performance. The importance of a sport psychologist to athletes or sports team in this respect cannot be overemphasized, therefore the sport psychologist is in a position to provide the needed therapy to athletes who have been psyched-out by personal, motivational and environmental factors. The paper therefore recommended among others that athletes should be advised for practice mental and psychological skill training and, faster rehabilitation of an injured athlete should be done as this would help to achieve success in peak performance.

**Keywords:** Peak Performance, Sports Skills, Psychological Skills, Attention and Personality.

## INTRODUCTION

A number of authors have added their voices to the definition and meaning of psychology. Colmna (2006) opined that psychology is the study of the nature, functions and phenomena of behaviour and mental experience. The etymology of the word “psychology” implies that it is simply the study of the minds, however most of modern psychology have little to do with the mind. Many authors define psychology simply as the study of behaviour or the science of behaviour which is an improvement on the understanding of the concept over the definition given by William (1965) that psychology is the science of minds law.

Psychology attempts to examine and understand the causal process which contributes to behaviour change. It attempts to discover why organisms behave differently by understanding, analyzing, predicting and controlling behaviour of organisms. It is therefore that branch of science which is concerned with the behaviour of organisms.

The establishment of psychology as an independent discipline separate from the discipline of philosophy and biology from which it emerged is attributable to the German psychologist Wilhelm (Max) Wundt (1832 – 1920). Who published a book on principle of physiological psychology in 1873 and the book became the first major textbook of experimental psychology. Wilhelm is also known for his establishment of the first psychological laboratory in Leipzig in 1879. Hayes (1998) observed that psychology as a formal branch of knowledge is usually considered to date from the 1880s, with the work of the pioneer of psychology Wilhelm Wundt, William James and Herman Ebbinghans, before that period it exited as a branch of philosophy. Three most influential philosophers helped the growth and development of psychology such as Descrate and Locke and the scientist Charles Darwin.

Sports psychology is the application of psychological principles and ideas to sports situation. Vealey in Wuest and Bucher (2006) asserts that Sport and exercise psychology is a systematic scholarly study of the behaviors, feelings, and thoughts of people engaged in sports, exercise and physical activity.

Sport psychology is a branch of sport science and psychology applied to sportsmen/women in athletic situations. The discipline of sports psychology is associated with attempts to study individuals in sports situations, analyze and explain or described in order to modify, alter or predict behaviour through various psychological means.

Wuest and Bucher (2006) posited that sport psychologists today work with both male and female athletes to help them perform at their optimal level.

They work with professional sport teams, national sports teams, some professional athletes or athletes that compete at an elite level, such as in figure skating, sports coaches may engage the service of a sport psychologist to help them achieve their goals.

Knowledge of sport psychology is important to coaches at all levels. It can help coaches more fully to

understand the psychological impact of their coaching behaviors and decisions on the athletes. Coaches can incorporate information from sport psychology into their preparation of athletes for competition and use information during competition to help their teams perform at their highest possible level (peak performance in sports).

Hornby (2004) defines peak performance as the point when somebody is best and most successful in performing a task. Athletes and coaches always think they must only practice longer and harder to attain this peak performance. They are reluctant to include psychological tools in their training and performance in quest for excellence which Wuest and Bucher (2006) noted as the Olympic motto of “Swifter, higher and stronger”. In other words athletes are constantly experimenting with new ways to enhance their performance.

According to Ikulayo (1990) psychological factors which must be considered for peak performance in sports include; personal factors, motivational factors and mental factors. To achieve excellence in sporting events, all of these factors have to interact positively to enable actors reach a harmonious state of readiness, physically, mentally and emotionally. This could be done by developing the strategies which will prepare the athlete to enter the competition with the “proper mindset”. For instance a long distance athlete may never think to enter a long distance race without spending time to physically prepare the body to meet the conditioning demands of a race. Yet, athlete want psychological skills. He or she would need to help him or herself achieve the best physical performance to excel in the competition.

As the science of sport performance evolves, it became increasingly important to integrate the mental and physical aspect of performance. Traditionally, no attention has been given to the cognitive aspects of performance. Coaches and athletes have devoted most of their attention to the physical component of performance.

#### **DETERMINANTS OF SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY THERAPY**

In many sport competitions different problems present themselves and may subsequently affect the athletes performance output. This issue arise from the following factors.

- a. Personal factors
- b. Motivational factors
- c. Environmental factors

**a. Personal Factors:** Personal factor is otherwise referred to as the personality of the athlete. Researchers have long been interested in personality factors and have investigated the effects of many different types of personality factors on performance (e.g.) extraversion-introversion, aggressiveness, independence, leadership and determination, e.t.c) in sport. Some researchers sought to address the question of whether sport influences personality, other researcher have investigated whether there were personality differences between athletes and nonathletes. Still other researchers undertook the task of identifying the psychological differences between elite athletes and their less successful counterparts. One of the questions was whether it would be possible to predict the success of an athletes based on his or her personality characteristics. Vealey (2000) describes personality as “the unique blend of the psychological characteristics and behavioral tendencies that make individuals different from and similar to each other”. Anshel (1997) describes personality as traits possessed by an individual that are enduring and stable. Because traits are enduring and stable, they predispose an individual to consistently act in certain ways in most but not all, situations; thus, there is a degree of predictability to an individual’s action Fisher and Futther (1997) suggest that psychological dispositions i.e. brand pervasive ways of relating to people and situations) may be more helpful in studying athlete’ psychological characteristic and, personality traits are linked to predispositions. The personality trait of dominance, trait anxiety, and internal Locus of control are linked to the Type A disposition. The early research focused on the relationship between personality trait and sport performance. Researchers addressed questions such as “Do athletes differ from non-athletes?” “Can athletes in certain sports be distinguished from athlete in other sports on the basis of their personality?” “Do highly skilled athletes have different personality profiles than less skilled athletes in the same sport?” “Are there certain personality traits that can predict an athlete’s success in a sport?” According to Wuest and Bucher (2006) research findings have revealed contradictory answers to each of these questions. Personality factors therefore relate to the individual athletes or pertains to his attitude, intelligence, emotional state, interest and sociability. It involves his physical ability and level of skill attained. It also involves neuromuscular activities and ability to cope with work and fatigue. Each of these factors when well-developed could be manipulated to produce excellent results, on the other hand if they are neglected they are bound to create problems.

**b. Motivational Factors:**

##### **Anxiety and Arousal**

Many athletes have reported that their performance has been adversely affected by being too anxious or aroused for an athletic competition. As a result of this, various strategies have been developed to help them cope with

high level of anxiety or arousal. The goal of coaches, teachers, and sport psychologists is therefore to optimize an individual's performance. To achieve this goal they must consider the effects of anxiety as defined by Levitt (1980), as a subjective feeling of apprehension accompanied by a heightened level of physiological arousal. Physiological arousal is an autonomic response that results in the body. Examples of this phenomenon seen in athletes are sweaty hands, frequent urge to urinate, increased respiration rate, increased muscle tension, and elevated heart rate. Anxiety is commonly classified in two ways. Trait anxiety is an integral part of an individual's personality. It refers to an individual's tendency to classify environmental events as either threatening or non-threatening. State anxiety is an emotional response to a specific situation that results in feelings of fear, tension, or apprehension (e.g. apprehension about an upcoming competition). The effects of both state and trait anxiety on athletes motor performance have been studied by sport psychologists. Coaches and teachers continually attempt to find the optimal level of arousal that allows individuals to perform their best. An arousal level that is too low or too high can have a negative impact on performance. A low level arousal in an individual is associated with such behaviors as low motivation, inattention, and inappropriate and slow movement choices. A high level of arousal in an individual is associated with such behaviors as deterioration in coordination, inappropriate narrowing of attention, distractibility, and a lack of flexibility in movement responses. It is important for each individual to find his or her optimal level of arousal for a given activity. However, no one knows for sure exactly how to consistently reach this ideal state. A variety of approaches have been employed by physical education and sport professionals in pursuit of this goal. These techniques include "Pep talks", use of motivational slogans and bill boards, relaxation training, imagery and in some cases the professional service of a sport psychologist. Motivational factors have both internal and external influences on the athlete and is broadly categorized under intrinsic and extrinsic motivation which can be both positive and negative. Motivation constitutes a vital prepared psychological therapy in sports coaching. There are a host of additional strategies that coaches can use to help athletes manage their anxiety and arousal. But the important fact is that coaches must be prepared to work with athletes as individuals and determine which approach is best for them. But being able to regulate an athlete's anxiety or arousal level throughout the competition is an extremely important skill for maintaining a high level of performance proficiency.

#### **Attention**

An individual's performance is greatly influenced by his or her attention to the task. The individual must locate, select, and focus on relevant cues to be successful in performing the task [skill or game]. Not only must the individual discriminate between relevant and irrelevant cues, but also he/she must maintain the necessary attention focus or the performance will be less than optimal. Therefore, an athlete who is under aroused may pay attention to the crowd or be thinking about an opponent instead of concentrating on the game. Similarly an athlete under high stress may be thinking about his or her own anxieties instead of concentrating on task-relevant cues like watching the ball. According to Nidiffer (1993) attention is the ability to direct senses and thought processes to particular objects, thoughts, and feelings. To be successful, an individual must match his or attentional focus with the task demands which often changes as the performance progresses. The individual must be able to switch rapidly back and forth between the various attentional styles at will.

#### **Goal-Setting**

Goal-setting is important in many of the different environments in which physical education, and sports leaders' works. Goal-setting can be used to help students in schools, physical education, athletes, sports teams, clients rehabilitating an injury, or adults involved in fitness program. Goal-setting is important both as a motivational strategy and a strategy to change behaviour or enhance performance. It is also used in intervention strategy to rectify problems or redirect efforts. According to Weinberg (2002) a goal is that which an individual is trying to accomplish. It is the object or aim of action. Goal-setting focuses on specific level of proficiency to be attained within a certain period of time. Goals can be categorized as outcome goals, performance goals, and process goals. Outcome goals typically focus on interpersonal comparisons and the end result of an event. An example of an outcome goal is to win first place at the senior games regional track meet at end of the season. Whether an outcome goal is achieved or not is influenced in part by the ability and play of the opponent. Performance goals refer to the individual's actual performance in relation to personal level of achievement. Striving to increase ground balls won in lacrosse from 5 to 10, decreasing the time to walk a mile from 20 minutes to 15 minutes, increasing the amount of weight that can be lifted following knee reconstruction, and improving one's free-throw percentage from 35% to 50% etc. Goal process focus on how a particular skill is performed. For example, increasing axial rotation in swimming the backstroke and following through on the tennis backhand are two examples of process goals that focus on the improvement of technique. As technique improves, improvements in performance are likely to follow.

- c. **Environmental Factors:** The environmental factors are factors directly related to the competitive situation, and are external to the athletes, such as the availability of team sports, eligibility, geographic restrictions, and sporting body organization structures, crowd, attitude of team mates' attitude of the coach. Aspect of the social environment also play a role, such as family expectation, peer pressures and socialization and

team size. (Carron, 1990; Widneyes, Brawley, and Carron, 1990). Positive environmental situations produce high quality performance while negative factors create problems for the athletes.

### Summary/Conclusion

Athletic situation usually encompasses, all the happenings in skills learning, practice and competition processes in relationship to performance environment. Each athlete is unique because of his individual characteristic which are different from others and he is treated as such in the field of sports psychology. Therefore the process of studying and assessing sports situations and the reaction, adaptation, tolerance and coping of the athlete with changes in the athletic environment affords the sports psychologists the opportunity to find solutions to the associated problems.

It is also their responsibility to shape the attitude of the sports men and women towards positive orientation to supports participation through counseling and guidance. According to Wuest and Bucher (2006) what individuals say to themselves during performance can be positive or negative. These though, an associated feelings can influence self-confidence, which in turn impacts performance. The relevance of sports psychology and a sports psychologist to peak performance in sports competition is a prominent one. The sports psychologist usually adopts or employs various psychological strategies, techniques and principles to enhance athletes out-put in competitions and help them to achieve their peak in the competitions.

### Recommendations

1. There should be interventions involving stress management techniques, coping strategies and mobilization of social support through education.
2. There should be total or maximum concentration on the task at hand and shifting out other distractions.
3. The athletes should be advised to practice mental and psychological skill training.
4. Athletes must develop sufficient concentration to exclude external variables (e.g. crowd) that may be negatively affect performance.
5. Faster rehabilitation of an injured athlete is recommended as this would help to achieve success in peak performance.
6. The athlete must achieve a mastery of the basic skills and this will help in the reduction of injury to the athlete.

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