

Psychological Skills Training in Sports: an overview

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Abstract

The importance of psychological skills training (PST) for improving performance is widely recognized. This paper attempted to introduce PST and discussed some latest literature and practices employed by sports psychologists to facilitate the athletes to improve their performances. Psychological Skills are a set of tools used by athletes to regulate their emotions. Psychological skills are learned through systematic training in three phases, education phase, acquisition phase and practice phase.

Keywords: Psychological Skills Training, Imagery, SMART, Mindfulness & PMR.

1. Introduction

Athletic performance is by-product of various factors predominately, physical fitness, skills, techniques, and psychological skills. We all know skills are significant for athletic performance and we all strive to improve the skills of the athletes. We also know that a high level of physical fitness is required to achieve success in athletics at high levels of competitions. Athletes train hours in the gym and field to improve their physical fitness. Athletes and the coaches have realized that psychology plays a significant role for athletic performance. Many experts believe that sports are ninety percent mental and 10% physical. But what people do to understand and train in this area is more unfamiliar. One of the most important aspects of psychology in sports is Psychological Skills Training or Mental Training (PST). Psychological Skills Training is the systematic practice of psychological skills to enhance performance. "Psychological skills training (PST) refers to the systematic and consistent practice of mental or psychological skills for the purpose of enhancing performance, increasing enjoyment, or achieving greater sport and physical activity self-satisfaction" (Weinberg & Gould, 2007, p. 250). These include goal setting, Imagery, self-talk, and Relaxation etc.

2. Misconception about Psychological Skills Training

Scientific studies have shown over and over that developing psychological skills improves athletic performance. But unfortunately, most of the athletes ignore this important aspect of the training. some of the misconception about PST are as under:

Misconception about psychological skills training

PST is an essential part of training not only for the problem athletes, but also for normal athletes. We never stop our practice and learning skills after a good game, similarly, if there is not any psychological problem, psychological skill training is important for achieving optimum results in the competitions.

PST is only for elite athletes

We all have heard and seen that elite level athletes competing for high level of competitions are always accompanied with a mental trainer as supporting staff, so we think that PST only helps elite level athletes competing at the high-pressure environment of nationals or the Olympics, anyone can benefit from a better mindset. Michael Phelps' long-time coach Bob Bowman taught him relaxation and visualization techniques from an early age that helped keep Phelps from being too excitable behind the blocks.

PST is a last-minute training aid

PST is not a magic pill, but in fact, it also works as a quick fix for some problems for athletes, but PST is done for the long term and consistent effort is required to achieve the results of PST.

3. Phases of Psychological Skills Training

Often, PST is divided into three stages: Education, Acquisition and Practice.

Education Phase

Many athletes are not aware of the fact that PST does improve athletic performance. Sometime athletes are skeptical about the use of PST. It is important to teach the athletes and understand the importance of PST. Psychologists need assessment of the athletes at this phase to determine exactly what kind of strategies are required to conduct the PST.

Acquisition Phase

Good teaching is necessary for an intervention to be successful. But good teaching is not sufficient to get the desired result. Good learning from the athlete's side is also essential. The primary goal of this phase is to aid the athletes in developing desired psychological skills. The programme is individualized so it meets the specific needs of the athletes.

Practice Phase

Practice makes man perfect is a proverb which tells us the importance of practice for learning anything in life. Planned, dedicated and continuous effort from the athletes is required to achieve the desired result of PST. It will take time to get the desired result. The psychologist has to reinforce and motivate the athletes to be consistent in learning PST.

4. Psychological Skills Training

Practitioners and councilors use various Mental skills training methods to facilitate the athletes to achieve desired results during the training and competitions. Some of the widely used and effective PST are discussed as under:

Imagery

Our brain cannot differentiate between imagery and real experience. Brain responds to these two experiences in the same manners and recruits the same neurons and muscles. Imagery has been described as "an experience that mimics real experience, and involves using a combination of different sensory modalities in the absence of actual perception" (Cumming & Ramsey, 2009, p.5). There are mainly two perspectives that people adopt when practicing imagery: Internal and External. There is one overriding model at the moment to guide practitioners in implementing imagery. This is known as the PETTLEP Model (Holmes & Collins, 2001). PETTLEP is an acronym which stands for 7 key elements to include during

imagery to create the most functionally equivalent image possible. Using the example of a footballer, the specific details to include would be:

- 4.1.1 Physical – physical means that imagery should be performed in the correct position instead of traditional couch position.
- 4.1.2 Environment – if possible, image in the environment where the performance takes place e.g. Football pitch.
- 4.1.3 Task – it must be identical to the real task.
- 4.1.4 Timing – the imagined experience should be the same, and therefore, take the same amount of time as the real experience.
- 4.1.5 Learning – refers to the current ability of the athlete.
- 4.1.6 Emotion – include the same images that would be felt in the physical situation. For example, a player imaging taking a penalty would include feelings of confidence and adrenaline rushes.
- 4.1.7 Perspective – the imagery perspective can be first person (through your own eyes) or third person (like watching yourself on video).

Goal Setting

Goal setting is one of the most important psychological skills to be taught to the athletes to achieve desired results in the practice and competitions. We all use goal setting in one way or another in our life. If we are pondering about what things to do to achieve your aim or planning various tasks for upcoming competition, you are actually setting your goal. We all are familiar with the acronym SMART. It is a simple guide that provides simple criteria for setting goals.

4.2.1 SMART stands for the following

1. ***Specific:*** Define a clear, specific goal.
2. ***Measurable:*** Make sure your goal is measurable to track progress, which helps you stay focused and meet deadlines.
3. ***Attainable:*** Create a realistic goal. It shouldn't be limiting but should be attainable.
4. ***Relevant:*** Ensure your goal matters to you and aligns with your other goals and the needs of the organization.
5. ***Time-bound:*** Assign a target date so that your SMART goal doesn't get lost in day-to-day demands.

4.2.2 Types of Goal

Generally, goals are categorized as norm referenced goal and self-referenced goal. Setting a goal to win an Olympic Medal is a norm-referenced goal, because success of the goal is based on comparing performance to other competitors. The problem here is we can't control the other athletes and there is no guarantee that goal will be achieved. Self-referenced goals further classified into two forms: performance goal and process goal. Performance goal typically concerned with the outcome measured in numerical. For example, rather than winning the competition, focus on personal best. The advantage of this goal is that it is under the control of the individual. In the process goal we are concerned with the process of the performance, which in turn generates outcome. For example, tennis players may think about wrist rotation in order to generate spin.

4.1. Concentration

Concentration is one of the most important psychological skills required for overall performance. Within sports, coaches and athletes often use the words concentration, attention

and focus interchangeably. They are not same but related terms, that's why we have been using these terms interchangeably. Concentration according to William James (1890), attention is "the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others".

4.3.1 Types of Attention

Attention can be either internal or external and broad or narrow. When athletes are focused inward (i.e. thoughts, emotions, physical sensations), they are said to have an internal focus. Athletes who are focused on the environment outside of themselves (i.e. weather conditions), are using an external focus. In terms of width, a broad focus is when athletes are paying attention to many things at once (e.g. examining an opponent's alignment), whereas focusing on a specific point (e.g. the spot on the ball where a kicker wants to hit it) is considered narrow. During competitions, athletes are often called upon to shift across these dimensions in order to meet the required attentional demands of the situation. The overlapping nature of these dimensions leads to four types of attentional control (Nideffer & Sagal, 2006, p. 384).

4.3.2 Techniques to improve concentration in sports

There are many techniques to improve concentration in sports, and the effectiveness of each method will vary with different athletes under different circumstances.

Thought-Stopping and Thought-Centering

There are two techniques that athletes must be aware of for keeping their focus on track; 'thought-stopping' - generating positive thoughts to stop negative thoughts taking over, and also 'thought-centering' - shifting the attention to set aside negative thoughts. The athlete must be able to identify their dysfunctional negative thoughts and feelings by considering two things: 'is it helpful to think like this?' and 'will these thoughts help me to achieve my objective?'. When the answer is no, the thoughts need stopping and centering.

Practice simulation

Try to create a practice condition similar to a competition scenario, athletes can take the help of fellow athletes to simulate the situation to a real competitive situation. The better the similar condition the better the athlete would be able to focus on the game during the competition.

Using keywords

Using keywords is an effective technique to avoid distraction during the competition. Keywords can be motivational "get ready", technical "swing" or psychological "relax".

Visual control:

Focus on the object or location which is not negatively related to the performance. Focus on the ball in the game.

Mastering the Skills

If athletes try to master the skills better, performing the task becomes more automatic as a result athletes can pay attention to the desired stimuli.

Be in present

Being able to remain in the moment is paramount for athletic performance. Focusing on the past can be very distracting, for example looking back over something that has just

happened in the game (missing a goal), instead of where to go now (the next shot on goal).

Staying positive during the practice and competition is very important to focus on the task at hand.

Relaxation Strategies

Though it is believed that playing sports regularly helps to reduce a person's stress and anxiety level and is very beneficial for overall health. But ironically, competitive sports are very tough and brutal, which demand very high physical and mental preparedness. We often heard coaches tell the athletes during competition 'just relax'. It's easier said than done. Because we never tell them how to relax. Just saying 'Relax', athletes aren't going to relax. Instead of saying 'relax,' we should say, 'Take a deep breath'. Some effective Relaxation strategies are presented as under:

Deep Breathing

Deep breathing is a simple and effective way to relax by reading heart rate and blood pressure. Inhale slowly through your nose, drawing air deep into your lungs. Hold your breath for about five seconds, then release it slowly. With each exhalation, imagine that you are getting rid of any stress or fatigue that might prevent you from performing your best. Focus only on each breath. Repeat the exercise five to 10 times.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

A good way to reduce mental tension is to reduce muscle tensions. An effective way to reduce muscle tension is through Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR). Isolate and contract muscle groups, creating tension for eight to 10 seconds, then relax the muscles and let the tension go. Concentrate on the feel of your muscles, specifically the contrast between tension and relaxation. In time, you will recognize tension in any specific muscle and be able to reduce it. Use words and phrases as you progress through the muscle groups—try "relax," "let go," "release," "stay calm" and "feeling fresh."

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is nowadays one of the most popular relaxation techniques used by the practitioners. The practice of mindfulness, which originated within the Buddhist tradition, can be loosely defined as a state of awareness achieved through purposely and non-judgmentally paying attention to the present and ongoing experiences of yourself and others—that is, attempting to put aside judgments of current situations, thoughts, or feelings as "good" or "bad." Mindfulness meditation is an approach that helps develop this non-judgmental awareness and that promotes calm and focus in potentially stressful situations.

Yoga

Yoga is the ancient Indian system to keep a person fit in body and mind. Yoga brings together physical and mental disciplines that may help you achieve peacefulness of body and mind. This can help you relax and manage stress and anxiety. Yoga has many styles, forms and intensities. Hatha yoga, in particular, may be a good choice for relaxation. Nowadays many European sports clubs, especially football clubs, employ yoga trainers to give yoga practice to the player with the objective to bring holistic development in the player. Some selected asanas along with pranayama are very effective in improving relaxation and reducing anxiety and stress. Psychological skills are important tools not only for elite and professional athletes but also for beginner and intermediate level of performance. Psychological skill is as important as Physical skill for achieving success in sports. To achieve optimum results all the

phases of learning psychological skills are very essential. PST program will improve performance by optimizing psychological variables related to performance.

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