

TECHNIQUES for BUILDING CONFIDENCE and ENHANCING PERFORMANCE

MIND over Matter

Intelligent coaches and athletes are aware of the need to train purposefully and objectively for races. Carefully planned training schedules, integrating hard work with adequate rest and recovery sessions produce the recipe for success and the fulfilment of sporting potential

Yet in spite of the conscientious adherence to these principles, many athletes fail to do justice to themselves and their abilities during races. This is invariably because they are mentally unprepared for the task in hand and because fear, anxiety, tension, and their own inhibitions get the better of them on the day of competition

It is all too easy to neglect psychological preparation in the build up to important races. Very often the emphases are on peaking procedures, energy boosting diets and discussions on tactics. The importance of mental as well as physical ability on athletics performance is frequently overlooked

Yet psychological readiness is imperative at all levels of endeavour. It is especially crucial when the difference in physical fitness and skill levels between rival competitors narrows. When physical factors such as speed, stamina, strength, suppleness and skill are more or less equal, the advantage in a closely contested race lies with the athlete who has the better mental edge

Peak Performance

Peak performance are those magic moments when an athlete puts it all together both physically and mentally, mind and body cannot be separated. The performance is exceptional, seemingly transcending ordinary levels. Competitively these performances often result in a personal best. They are the ultimate high, the thrilling moment that athletes and coaches work for in their pursuit of excellence. Unfortunately they are relatively rare so that we may ask "Can athletes be trained so that peak performances occur more frequently and if not, to produce a peak performance, can athletes be trained so they consistently compete close to their optimal level?"

Is there an ideal body-mind state associated with peak performance and if so can it be learned and developed

While athletic and sport science communities long have been devoted to improving physical training program, today, emphasis is being placed on the psychological components of performance as well

The focus of this article is then to look at the mental side of peak performance and how the mind interacts with the body in ultimately producing performance. The higher the skill level the more important the mental aspects become. Most athletes and coaches will acknowledge that at least 40%-90% of success in sports is due to mental factors. When describing his approach to golf, Tiger Woods stated "It is a thinking man's game to a great degree. I believe my mind is my greatest weapon."

When the physical, technical and mental readiness of Olympic athletes was assessed only mental readiness significantly predicted Olympic success

If the mental side of performance is so important to success then perhaps an ideal internal psychological climate exists during peak performance. Do not think that the field of sport psychology has found all the answers, there is however a growing foundation for understanding the mental side of performance. In fact research now exists showing that psychological skills training can improve performance

Psychological Characteristics During Peak Experiences in Sport

Identified were:

- *Loss of fear- no fear of failure*
- *Total immersion in the activity-there is a clarity about what one is to do*
- *Total and complete concentration on the task at hand occurs*
- *Feeling in complete control-enjoying what one is doing-control over emotion, thoughts and attaining optimal arousal*
- *Feeling that performance was automatic and effortless-physically and mentally relaxed*
- *Highly self confident*
- *Highly energized*

Associated with the above an athlete can be said to be in the 'Flow'

Our Ideal Athlete in summary would then be:

- *Confident*
- *Controls their anxiety*
- *Positive thinker*
- *Understands the technical aspects easily*
- *Resistant to peer pressure*
- *Motivated*
- *Deals with the lows*

Cognitive Techniques then for Building Confidence and Enhancing Performance

Athletes who are truly outstanding are self confident. Confident athletes think about themselves and the action at hand in a different way than those who lack confidence. They have discovered that what they think and say to themselves in practice and competition is critical to performance. They have learned that the conscious mind is not always an ally, that it must be disciplined, just as their bodies have been disciplined, to respond effectively in the heat of competition.

We all spend vast amounts of time talking to ourselves. Much of the time we are not even aware of this internal dialogue, much less its content. Nevertheless, thoughts directly affect feelings and ultimately actions

Thoughts-----Feelings-----Behaviour

Inappropriate or misguided thinking usually leads to negative feelings and poor performance, just as appropriate or positive thinking leads to enabling feelings and good performance. The conscious mind, that remarkable uniquely human instrument, is not as we have said automatically one's ally. It must be trained to think effectively. Confidence is then the result of particular thinking habits more so than physical talent, opportunity, or previous success. These thinking habits, when consistently practised until they have become automatic and natural, enable athletes to both retain and benefit from the experiences in which they have become successful, and release or restructure the memories and feelings from the less successful experiences. The result of this selective perception is the priceless trait called confidence

Confident athletes think they can and they do. They never give up, they are typically characterized by positive self talk, images and dreams. They imagine themselves winning and being successful. They say positive things to themselves and hence never doubt their abilities. They focus on mastering a task rather than worrying about performing poorly or the negative consequences of failure. This predisposition to keep one's mind on the positive aspects of one's life and sport performance, even in the face of setbacks and disappointments is a hallmark of the successful athlete, a trait of 'learned optimism'

If confidence is so critical to successful performance and personal growth what then can we do to promote self confidence within our athletes?

Many are obvious, eg seeing improvement in physical skill is an obvious way to build confidence. Providing for a history of successful experiences builds both confidence and the expectation of future success. Effective coach-athlete interactions are likely to enhance each athlete's sense of self worth and self esteem. Practices that maximize such growth in athletes whether the growth be in physical skills or personal development, lead to a more positive self-concept and increased self confidence

However learning to use and control thoughts or cognitions appropriately would seem an avenue well worth pursuing to enhance performance. Developing and maintaining confidence for high level competition requires that athletes recognize and then deliberately step away from many of the thinking habits that are often part of the socialization process. It is important that athletes understand how the mind works, how it affects their feelings and actions, and ultimately how it can be disciplined. Initially thoughts may appear to occur spontaneously and involuntarily, thus, beyond control. With the skills of intentional thinking, athletes can control their thoughts. They can also learn to use 'Self Talk' (more on this subject later) to facilitate learning and performance. They can also learn to replace self-defeating thoughts with positive ones, thoughts that build confidence and the expectation of success. Such positive thought processes can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Before we talk about the learning of a few skills of effective positive thinking let us dispel some misconceptions about confidence

Either you have it or you don't

This belief implies that nothing can be done to enhance confidence, so why bother trying?. The truth is that the high self-confidence seen in outstanding athletes is not an accident or a random occurrence over which athletes have no control. Instead, confidence is the

result of a consistently constructive thinking process that allows athletes to do two things;(1) hang onto and thus benefit from their successful experiences and (2) let go of or deemphasize their less successful experiences. Thus athletes gain confidence in the same way that they gain other skills or attributes—through practice and repetition of the proper habits

Only Positive Feedback Can Build Confidence:

Although positive feedback from parents or coaches helps to build confidence it is possible to selectively perceive and reinterpret criticism,sarcasm,and negative comments as stimulating challenges and use them to build confidence. Instead of being mentally destroyed by what appears to be negative feedback,athletes who choose to respond by reinterpreting the comments or using active strategies to combat them may actually gain confidence. Thus with the right attitude and thinking skills athletes can gain confidence even when they are overlooked,underestimated and disrespected,provided they selectively screen and reinterpret these experiences

Success Always Builds Confidence:

It is generally true that ‘nothing succeeds like success’ but this is not the whole story.Successful high school athletes do not always make an easy transition to Senior competition despite their years of previous success. Other successful athletes may lose their confidence because their past success becomes a form of pressure from which they cannot escape. Still other athletes who experience great success use their perceptual abilities to focus only on their weaknesses and to remember only their failures. Thus,successful athletes may limit their future success because they do not have the level of confidence that their accomplishments would suggest

Confidence Equals Outspoken Arrogance:

Certain confident individuals in the world of sport are outspoken and brash,but there are just as many who carry with them an equally powerful quiet confidence. It is crucial for athletes to realize that they can be confident without being considered conceited or arrogant

Mistakes Inevitably Destroy Confidence

Too many athletes respond to their mistakes with weakened or diminished confidence. Although this is inevitable at times ironically these athletes lose confidence because they selectively attend more to their mistakes and errors. Because of this shortcoming many athletes become more cautious,more tentative and more fearful with further and greater competition. Other athletes build confidence despite repeated failures because they use their perceptual abilities to selectively attend to whatever small improvements and positive experiences occur. Thus athletes can learn to gain confidence even while making mistakes and this is what the greatest athletes have always done

*Taken collectively the preceding points all indicate that confidence has relatively little to do with what happens to an individual. Instead **confidence is a result of how one thinks, what one focuses on, and how one reacts to the events in one's life***

How does one then gain confidence?

The following four prerequisites provide a solid foundation for building confidence

- *Understand the interaction of thought and Performance*
- *Cultivate honest self-awareness*
- *Develop an optimistic explanatory style*
- *Embrace a psychology of excellence*

Understanding the Interaction of Thought and Performance:

The thoughts we have of our ability, of the demands we face, and of the environment we happen to be in determine to a large extent the way we feel inside at any given moment. Think 'I have done this many times before', and you feel confident. Think 'I am being taken advantage of', and you feel anger. Think 'This practice is worthless', and you feel impatient. These immediate feelings, in turn directly affect performance, because they produce objectively verifiable changes in muscle tension, blood flow, hormone production, and attentional focus. For example, thoughts that anticipate failure lead to feelings of anxiety and, among others, overall muscle tension. When the wrong muscles are tense, or the right muscles are tense at the wrong times, coordination and timing are disrupted. The confident athlete deliberately directs his or her thoughts onto those aspects of the environment and onto those aspects of self that produce powerful, confident feelings, so as to produce better and better performance

Cultivate Honest Self-Awareness:

Striving for control over one's thoughts and feelings is a process demanding honest self-awareness. One must be willing to honestly pursue the question 'Am I really thinking in a way that will give me the best chance of success?'. For most people who play sport the real opponent is within themselves in the form of self-criticism, self doubt, and hesitation, all of which are caused by ineffective cognitive habits. This means athletes with great confidence have simply learned to win the battle with themselves. This is then the most difficult battle that anyone will ever try to win and is the challenge for so much potential for self development and satisfaction

Develop an Optimistic Explanatory Style:

Explanatory style is the hallmark of whether an individual is an optimist or pessimist. This habitual style of interpreting events is developed in childhood and adolescence and stems from your view of your place in the world, whether you think you are valuable and deserving or worthless and hopeless. The concept of explanatory style is especially applicable to the competitive sport environment in that sport participation inevitably

involves set-backs, obstacles, and disappointments to which an athlete must respond optimistically. In this world of sport explanatory style is a useful tool for helping athletes maintain optimism and confidence

By learning techniques of 'Self Talk and selective perception and then employing these techniques in practice and competition athletes can systematically cultivate optimism and gain confidence

Embrace a Psychology of Excellence:

As has been already been mentioned, confidence in competitive performance is the result of a consistently constructive thinking process, a process in which one's thoughts about oneself, one's sport and one's experience in that sport are all aligned to produce energy, optimism and enthusiasm

A failure focus occurs when well meaning teachers, coaches and parents repeatedly ask questions such as 'Why did you do that?' or 'What went wrong?' after the athlete makes some mistake or fails to perform up to expectations

To resist these negative aspects of socialization athletes need first to recognize that high levels of performance and personal growth will not occur with a negative focus. Also if they currently have such a focus they can learn to change it.

SELF TALK

The key to cognitive control is 'self talk'. The frequency and content of thoughts vary from person to person and situation to situation. You engage in self-talk any time you carry on an internal dialogue with yourself, such as giving yourself instructions and encouragement or interpreting what you are feeling or perceiving. This dialogue can occur out loud (eg mumbling to yourself) or inside your head.

Self talk becomes an asset when it enhances self-worth and performance

Self talk becomes a liability when it is negative, distracting to the task at hand, or so frequent that it disrupts the automatic performance of skills.

*Negative self-talk becomes especially destructive when an athlete evaluates his or her performance and then engages in derogatory self-labelling or self-rating, by using labels such as 'loser', 'choke' artist and the like. **When athletes hold these negative perceptions of themselves, they will often behave in ways that will confirm these perceptions and thus prove to themselves that they are 'right'***

Raising self-esteem through effective self talk, however takes time and patience. A conscious effort to screen out negative memories and statements and to focus the mind on present strengths and desired outcomes is required. Self-esteem and confidence begins and ends in the mind of the individual with self-talk playing the primary and most powerful role in feeding the mind.

Remember 'Winners say what they want to happen, losers say what they fear may happen'

Planned self talk can enhance skill acquisition and performance, changing bad habits, attention control, creating affect or mood, changing affect or mood, controlling

effort, building self-efficacy and for increasing adoption and maintenance of exercise behaviour

The first step in gaining control of self-talk is to become aware of what you say to yourself. Surprisingly enough most people are not aware of their thoughts, much less the powerful impact they have on their feelings and behaviour. By getting athletes to review carefully the way in which they talk to themselves in different types of situations the coach will identify what kind of thinking helps, what thoughts appear to be harmful and what situations or events are associated with this talk

Identifying the thoughts that typically prepare an athlete to perform well and to cope successfully with problems during performance can provide a repertoire of cognitive tools for the enhancement of performance. The use of these same thoughts in future performance environments should create similar feelings of confidence and direct performance in much the same way. When an athlete can re-create these positive thoughts and bring them to the new environment, the athlete can be said to be 'taking control' of his or her mind

Most athletes discover that during an unsuccessful performance their mind actually programmed failure through self doubt and negative statements. The body merely performed what the mind was thinking. Examples include an athlete thinking before a competition 'I never run well in the heat or rain or at this track' or 'I always run poorly against this opponent' and then going on to compete exactly as prophesied

Obviously future performance would be enhanced if athletes could eliminate dysfunctional and self-defeating thoughts that lead to worry and poor performance. Before such thoughts can be eliminated they need to be identified. Three of the most effective tools for identifying self talk are retrospection, imagery and keeping a self talk log.

Retrospection

By reflecting on situations in which they performed particularly well or particularly poorly and trying to re-create the thoughts and feelings that occurred prior to and during these performances, many athletes are able to identify typical thoughts and thought patterns associated with good and bad performance. It is also beneficial to recall the specific situation or circumstances that led to the thoughts and resulting performance. Viewing videotapes of actual past performances helps the athlete recount the action by heightening the memory of the event.

Imagery

Another technique is to have athletes relax as deeply as possible and then try reliving a past performance through visualisation and remembering other sensory experiences such as how a moment felt or sounded. This takes time to master but athletes who are effective at imagery can usually describe exactly what happened during the competition and what thoughts and feelings preceded, accompanied and followed the performance. When good performance is analyzed it should be with the intent of capitalizing on the state of mind

that existed during that performance in the hope of being able to purposefully duplicate it in the future

Self-Talk Log

Not all athletes can use retrospection and imagery to remember accurately how they thought and felt or what circumstances triggered their thoughts and feelings. Keeping a diary or self talk log of thoughts and performance situations is an excellent tool for accurately creating awareness of self talk

When keeping a log the athlete should address such questions as When I talk to myself what do I say?. What thoughts precede and accompany my good performances? When do I have negative thoughts? Do I begin doubting myself even before I have a chance to perform?.

Athletes are then gradually able to identify specific cues that caused them to start worrying or thinking negatively and as such begin to gain control over their thoughts

However the mere act of monitoring thoughts is usually not enough. In fact paying too much attention to negative thoughts or thoughts associated with poor performance can be detrimental if they are not linked to some action or change process

Learning to turn off negative or inappropriate thoughts take time particularly when negative thought patterns have become the athlete's habitual mode of response to adversity. The more practise an athlete employs the less likely negative thought patterns are to recur

Changing Negative Thoughts to Positive Thoughts

Although it makes sense to stop negative thoughts altogether sometimes this cannot be accomplished. An alternative is to learn to couple any negative thought with a positive thought that either provides encouragement and support or appropriately redirects attention. If for example an athlete finds himself saying 'the proper correct technique of learning High Jumping is very hard----I'll never get it right' he should learn to follow this phrase immediately with 'I've learned lots of hard moves before so I know if I am patient I can learn this one too'

Changing self-talk from negative to positive works perhaps best if coaches have their athletes individually make a list of typical self-defeating things they say and would like to change. Athletes can often generate this list from the self talk log discussed earlier. The goal is to recognize why the negative thought occurred and then design a substitute positive statement. It may be helpful to make a table with the self-defeating thoughts on one side and the preferred self enhancing statements directly opposite the negative thought:

Self-Defeating Thoughts

I can't believe this heat. I have to run a 5000m race

Change to self-Enhancing Thoughts

No one likes distance running in severe heat but I can run as well in it as anyone else

You stupid fool

*Ease off . Everyone makes mistakes
I will put my mind to what I want to
do*

*There's no sense in further training
I have no talent*

*I've seen good athletes who have had
to work really hard to be successful
I can get better if I practise correctly*

This officiating stinks,I'll never win

*There's nothing I can do about the
officials so let's just concentrate on
performing well to the best of my
ability.If I do the officiating won't
matter*

*Why did I no Jump again—I am so
nervous,I'll probably choke and not
score*

*My heart is beating fast. That's OK
I have jumped a hundred times
correctly before,this last jump will be
no different now*

*We will win the meeting onlyif I come first
or second in this last event*

*Stop worrying about the score,just
concentrate on how you are going to
execute the event*

*The coach must think I'm hopeless.He
never helps me*

*That's not fair. He has a whole group
to look after.Tomorrow I'll ask what
he thinks I need to work on most*

I don't want to fail

*Nothing was ever gained by being
afraid to take risks. As long as I give
my best,I'll never be a failure*

*I'll take it easy today and go hard
next workout*

*The next workout will be easier if I go
hard now*

Who cares how well I do anyway?

*I care and I'll be happier if I push
myself*

This hurts,I don't know if it is worth it

*Of course it hurts,but the rewards are
worth it*

*Notice that the self-enhancing statements in the table always bring the athlete back to the present time and personal control of the situation. **The positive self talker sees a possibility in every problem,not a problem in every possibility***

Finally there is nothing unusual about having negative thoughts and even the greatest athletes have anxious or negative thoughts on occasion. A tennis legend once feared he wouldn't get a single serve in the court, just before a major tournament

A famous golfer stood over a 2 foot put that would allow him to win one of the majors only to think initially 'What if I stub my putter into the ground and miss the ball entirely and lose the tournament '. These champions however did not store their negative thoughts away where they could build themselves into a mental block. Instead they stopped those thoughts and replaced them with positive thoughts. The key is not to give in to these negative thoughts and allow them to control and dominate the mind. Make the last thought in any string or sequence of thoughts positive and self enhancing. This is possible if you become aware of your negative self-talk and use it as a signal to stop, cope and take control

A final thought is that sometimes the enemy is actually the person you see in the mirror. The athlete is in complete control of their own thoughts and attitudes, they must not let the person in the mirror defeat them. That person is the first one they need to overcome to have a great performance. That person is also the one they will live with for the rest of their lives and therefore it seems totally illogical to allow that person to plant negative or self-defeating thoughts

Good Luck or do you make your own?

