A “MENTAL TRAINING” APPROACH TO PERFORMANCE ENHANCEMENT

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My journey of observation, study and talking with coaches and athletes about the mental aspects of sport performance began in 1979 while casually watching the women’s gymnastic team work-out at my university. On that particular day, the focus was on the balance beam and it was not going well. The harder they tried, the worse it got; after a while, the coach became frustrated, and suddenly yelled: “Ken, you teach relaxation, don’t you?” I said, “Yes,” and he said, “Do something.”

I first had the gymnasts acknowledge the truth of the situation (i.e. the performance on the balance beam was not going well) and then we proceeded to work on some relaxation and imagery. After about 10 minutes, I told the coach the gymnasts were ready. Once the women got back to performing, the coach and I observed absolutely no improvement. What I learned from that experience was that a “quick fix” of mental skills has minimal effect on performance. Mental skills must be practiced just like physical skills. They take time, commitment and refinement to work effectively in pressure situations.

Since that first experience, coaches and athletes at all levels of competition and in a wide variety of sports have provided me a great deal of information that has allowed me to refine and develop my approach (Ravizza, 1986; Ravizza, 1988). One constant in my work is to observe and listen to coaches and athletes, learn what works for them and refine mental skills training to meet the needs of the specific athlete and/or team. As a mental training consultant you have to be flexible enough to work in the context of that specific situation in which you find yourself (Partington & Orlick, 1987; Orlick, 1989; Ravizza, 1988).

For the remainder of this chapter I will attempt to share some of the insights I have gained over the years working with athletes. Initially I will present my basic philosophy of working with athletes in the area of performance enhancement. This section will address four major areas: the educational nature of my approach, concern for the total person, the role of responsibility, and the importance of the athlete increasing awareness of the sport experience. The final section of this chapter will focus on putting these concepts into practical application.

Educational Approach

My approach is educational in nature and focuses on performance enhancement. My expertise is skill as a teacher, and my background in sport studies forms the foundation to my work. I believe that the mental skills can be learned in the same manner that we learn physical skills. Obviously, some athletes have more “natural” ability to implement mental skills but many skills are developed through an understanding of how they function and through daily practice. I also firmly believe that learning is a collaborative process between the student and the teacher/coach. Each learning situation has a unique context that must be considered for the learning to be effective. This is particularly true for elite athletes. For example, a small difference in a team’s and/or individual’s mental game can make a vast difference because the physical skills are so similar at this level.

Most of my experience has been with elite level athletes, but the conclusions I have reached
are useful and can be applied by mental training consultants at all levels. From my perspective pre-packaged “canned” programs are of limited utility because they fail to meet the specific needs in the unique context of that group or situation. The mental training consultant must collaborate with the coaches and athletes to determine what works for them.

Many elite athletes have some very good mental skills but these frequently “just happen”. With little understanding of how they operate or even how or why they occur. I normally emphasize two major points in collaborating with the athletes to facilitate a better understanding of their mental skills. First, I assume that elite athletes know what works for them when they are performing well, then it becomes a matter of helping them become aware of this knowledge and this is accomplished by earning their trust and respect. Once I have their trust and respect, they feel comfortable sharing the things they do and responding openly and honestly to relevant questions concerning their performance (Gould, Tammen, Murphy, & May, 1989; Halliwell, 1989; Salmela, 1989).

Second, as mental training consultants, we often provide a structure or framework for the athlete’s mental skills (Ravizza, 1987). I often have athletes report to me after they hear me talk, “Ken, I do a lot of things you talk about but I never understood how they fit together.” By providing a structure or framework the athlete develops more control of his/her mental game. For example, an athlete may see that the use of imagery may not only help with technical refinements of skill execution but also that the imagery can be used to enhance mental preparation for the competitive arena. If the athlete feels as though he/she has been there before and is familiar with the situation, it helps them feel more comfortable and subsequently reduces the anxiety level.

The foundation of my educational approach to performance enhancement includes three phases. First, provide accurate information concerning the importance, development and refinement of mental skills in performance enhancement. For example, the relationship of an athlete’s arousal level to performance? Second, facilitate the practice and refinement of mental skills for use during pressure situations. This is accomplished by developing relaxation and activation that can be integrated into task relevant skills. The third and final phase is to support the athlete in learning and refining the mental skills. This requires providing regular, systematic, and ongoing feedback. The athletes must know themselves well and recognize the strengths and weaknesses of their mental game.

Total Person Development

Another major tenet of my approach is that the athlete must be treated as a total person. At times coaches get overly concerned about the technical and strategic aspects of performance and they forget that it is a human being who is performing. And parts of that human condition are the occasional “self-doubts, fears, personal problems, and mental lapses” that we all have. The athlete is first and foremost a person who happens to possess excellent physical attributes, but athletics should be recognized as just one of the many things this person does. I have found that if the individual can keep the “athlete” part of his/her life in perspective, it helps in maintaining a balance so that her/his whole identity isn’t directly determined by performance. I believe this balance is a necessity if the athlete is going to be successful and maintain some enjoyment for the duration of his/her career.

I utilize the holistic approach to performance enhancement, which is grounded from my background in study and practice of Hatha Yoga. This is an approach that emphasizes the balance between the mental, emotional and physical aspects of performance. In my work the mental aspects are reflected in clear and proper thinking about the performance (strategy and mental adjustments that need to be made in the midst of competition). The mental component is emphasized in the athlete being aware of what is happening in relation to the performance so that, if needed, compensations and adjustments can be made. Also, recognition of one’s ability to concentrate appropriately can be assessed and adjusted as needed. The mental aspects of
performance are critical since the athlete must be consistent, and this requires the ability to recognize when one needs to compensate and adjust to meet the demands of the situation.

In order to think clearly and be aware, the athlete must first be in emotional control of himself/herself. Something I always emphasize to athletes is that you must be in control of yourself before you can control the performance. This is a point where many of the traditional psychological techniques can be implemented, but they need to be integrated with task-related cues if they are to be effective during pressure situations.

I believe this is one of the essential areas that we as a field need to address. Just because athletes understand their mental game and can incorporate the mental skills off the field doesn’t mean they can concentrate in the midst of the competitive arena. As one coach said to me early in my career, “We do all this relaxation in practice but I want them to relax when they are in the game and the pressure is on.” I believe the transference from practicing the mental skills to implementing them effectively when the pressure is on is critical if you are going to be effective as a mental training consultant.

In order to aid in the transference, the final component of the holistic approach is to integrate the mental and emotional aspects into the actual skill execution physically. This is where my background in Physical Education has significantly helped to integrate my approach into the actual physical performance. The ability to communicate, empathize, and work closely with the coaching staff cannot be underestimated. To work with the coaching staff requires that the consultant earn the coach’s trust and respect. The greatest ideas and the most effective methods are useless if the coach does not support and/or believe in what you are trying to do. The harsh reality is that without the coaches’ support you may have little or no impact (Botterill, 1990; Gordon, 1990). The physical component also serves as a solid foundation because if the strength, conditioning and skill development is not adequate, then developing the mental and emotional aspects of performance is going to have limited value. Thus, I am always telling athletes to “pay the dues” and “put the hay in the barn.” In this day and age it is assumed that elite athletes will take care of this and if they do not, they will be weeded out very quickly. Thus, the athlete’s mental, emotional and physical development equips him/her with the specific skills to go to in pressure situations. This enables the athlete to feel more confident because he/she is prepared to deal with adversity.

Responsibility

This educational and total person approach provides a proactive method to facilitate the athlete’s ability to handle more effectively the multitude of distractions that confront him/her in the pursuit of excellence. It is critical to understand that as an elite athlete, one has limited control of what goes on in the surrounding environment but total control of how he/she chooses to respond to it. However, as mentioned earlier, the athletes must be in control of themselves before attempting to control their performance. As an elite athlete stated in such a unique manner, “...Ain’t no use worryin’ ‘bout things beyond your control, ‘cause if they’re beyond your control, ain’t no use worryin’... Ain’t no use worryin’ ‘bout things within your control, ‘cause if you get them under control, ain’t no use worryin’.”

Self-control is critical and the athlete must take responsibility to know him/herself and the way he/she experiences pressure and what must be done to perform consistently. Thus, a key concept here is that athletes must take responsibility to know themselves, the sport per se and how they react in the competitive situation. The athlete needs to take the responsibility for making a personal commitment to excellence. This concept of responsibility serves as the foundation of my approach. If the athlete fails to take responsibility then it is impossible to reach his/her potential. If the athlete recognizes he/she messed up, then it is possible to learn from the mistake. Failure becomes positive feedback when the athlete takes responsibility and adjusts as needed to perform more effectively. A more advanced aspect of responsibility is for the athlete to increase his/her level of awareness so that, instead of merely going through the
motions in training or practice, he/she becomes more aware and takes charge of current status and readjusts to meet all the performance demands.

The Importance of Awareness

As discussed earlier, by being aware of internal kinesesthetic cues athletes can determine what they have control of and what they do not control (Ravizza, 1986). Being in control allows the athlete to first assess the situation and then choose the appropriate resources or specified mental skills to effectively deal with the situation. Thus, when working with performers I have two areas of focus:

First, I want to determine how the athlete appraises or thinks about the situation in which she finds herself. I call this clear and effective thinking. The emphasis is on using the situation to your advantage. The athlete must determine what he has control of and what is not under his control and use his mental skills to manage the situation in an effective manner. For example, say a baseball pitcher may be ready to perform but there is a rain delay. At this point he has a decision to make. He can either get upset or he can use the time delay to his advantage (i.e., do some imagery, just relax and recognize that the delay affects everyone and can be used to his advantage to take control of his response to the delay). For these reasons we (the athlete and I) spend time discussing the role confidence and clear thinking plays in enhancing performance. We discuss the concept that “attitude is a decision” and that we choose the attitude we want to have. It is easy to have a confident, productive attitude when things are going well.

The athlete must learn to deal effectively with the immediate situation. For example, say a hitter in softball is behind in the count: no balls, two strikes. She can choose how she wants to think about it. She can either think negatively (“this at-bat is over”) or positively (“I have seen two pitches and now I am ready to make solid contact with the ball”). The athlete’s appraisal of the situation also helps her evaluate the performance. I often tell athletes, “Failure is positive feedback.” How you process or learn from the sport experience is a major aspect of your development. The quest for excellence is filled with a multitude of distractions, pitfalls, hassles and difficult experiences. But, as one learns from failure it only helps him get stronger. This is not a new concept, but a different slant that I use to teach athletes to be more systematic and thorough in their performance evaluation so that the important lessons can be pulled out of the experience (Orlick, 1989). I often say, “You have spent countless hours of your live playing this game, so what did you learn today to take that small step toward your dream?” Most important, I often encourage athletes to write about their performance because this helps them to learn, then let go of the experience, and not dwell on the negative aspects of it for an inappropriate amount of time.

Second, awareness is important so that once the athlete effectively appraises his/her responses, they can apply a wide range of mental skills or resources to cope with varied situations. This is where the athletes must conscientiously and repeatedly perform their mental skills in practice. I cannot emphasize this concept too much: quality practice and training are critical because athletes must learn to work on their skills in practice in order to develop confidence in their ability to handle adversity during the pressure situations. I believe that whatever they want to achieve in the competitive arena, the athletes must first accomplish it in practice. Every coach I have worked with really appreciates this aspect of my approach because it reinforces the importance of increasing the quality and intensity of practice. When practice is perceived more like the game, then performance during competition can be viewed as similar to doing it just like practice (and they have executed it in practice many times). So the bigger the contest, the more important it is to just do what you do in practice and training. Of course this requires more intensity in practice, which necessitates intent or mission and a present orientation during the executing of the task. Thus, in practice I would rather have the athlete take five quality plays instead of 15 plays where he is just going through the motions. This approach provides the athlete with more confidence and also re-enforces consistency because
one is not trying to "psych up" and play beyond her ability; but instead, she is focused on doing what she has done in practice.

Awareness is a phenomenon that occurs in the here and now. It is in the process, and in my approach the emphasis is on the process and not the end result. The reason for the emphasis being on the process is because this is where a person has control. So often the athlete becomes obsessed with the end result and loses focus, tries too hard and gets distracted by something over which he has no control. For example, a pitcher in a pressure situation must pitch one pitch at a time instead of trying too hard to win the game. So often when the going gets tough the pitcher tries to "bear down" and attempts to strike the batter out instead of making one good pitch, and hit the mitt, pitch by pitch. This type of focus takes self-control and self-discipline as the athlete attempts to remain focused on the process.

The final component of awareness and clear thinking is the ability to trust your skills and training when it is actually time to perform. From my work on peak experiences in sport, the athletes kept reporting, "I was in a zone, I was just doing it." (Ravizza, 1977). It was like they did the preparation and now they could just "let go" and execute. Some athletes describe this feeling as an "effortless effort." Thus my approach is an educational, total person approach that requires that the athlete take responsibility for the performance. Self-awareness is the key concept that can help form a foundation for the mental abilities to respond to the demands of the situation.

Practical Application

Thus far, it has been my intention to acquaint the reader with some of the major philosophical foundations of my approach in working with performance enhancement. This background provides the rationale for my program and the way I work with athletes. A lot of points I have made are good in theory but it is critical to put them into use in the practical situation of competitive sport. The last part of this chapter will provide the reader with the way that I incorporate information, insights and mental skills into performance-relevant cues that can be used when the pressure is on. There are two major areas that I want the athlete to focus on: self-control and the performance. As mentioned earlier, the athlete must be in control of himself before he can control the performance. Thus, my approach addresses both of these areas by incorporating seven concepts and/or steps that the athlete must consider. To simplify this, I chose all words that began with the letter "R": responsibility, recognition, release, regroup, refocus, ready and respond.

The "R's"

The "R's" were developed from my initial research on peak experiences in sport (Ravizza, 1977). I discovered that when athletes were at their peak levels, then they were totally engrossed in only one thing at a time. This was further reinforced in my work with coaches where they kept emphasizing "one pitch at a time," "one play at a time," or "keep it simple." I would ask coaches how could the athlete do that, because when things are going well, it is relatively easy; but when the athlete is confronted by adversity it is not so simple. Athletes report to me at times, "I know what I should do but I have difficulty fully committing myself to that one thing." It was from my frustrations in helping athletes to concentrate or think effectively during performance that I developed the "R's." (Ravizza & Osborne, 1991).

RESPONSIBILITY

The first "R" is Responsibility and it provides the core of the approach. The athlete has to be proactive and take control of his response to the situation. If the athlete is not willing to accept the responsibility then there is little that can be done from a mental game perspective. Compensation and adjustment, not perfection, are major themes in my thoughts concerning responsibility. Too many athletes have destroyed themselves mentally because they could not attain a perfect performance when it was desired. Mistakes and distractions are going to occur.
The mentally tough athlete knows this and, therefore, has an advantage over the rest of the field because of his/her ability to compensate and adjust to mistakes and changing circumstances.

In order to compensate and adjust, the athlete needs a plan of action. At the heart of the plan is a sequence of the remaining six "R's": recognize, release, regroup. The "R's" are concerned with self-control, and re-focus, ready, and respond are directly related to performance. The "R's" become the steps to gaining control, thinking clearly and trusting yourself in the midst of performance.

At this point the R's provide a basic framework addressing the areas of self-control and performance and they must be modified to meet the demands of the specific sport (i.e. open or closed skill). Thus, they will be different for a pitcher in baseball, a mid-fielder in soccer, or a downhill skier. As I present this framework, I will use the example of a pitcher in baseball taking it "one pitch at a time".

**THE R'S**

**RESPONSIBILITY**

**RESPOND (TRUST IT!)**

**READY (BREATHE)**

**RECOGNIZE (AWARENESS)**

**RELEASE (LET GO)**

**REFOCUS (CLEAR THINKING)**

**REGROUP (CENTERED)**

**RECOGNIZE**

Recognition requires that the athlete know what works to regulate one's own arousal level, to think clearly, to prepare appropriately and to trust oneself when the pressure is on. In baseball, after the pitcher makes the pitch, he must RECOGNIZE or be aware of what happened. What did he learn from making that pitch? What is the umpire giving him for a strike zone? Can the batter hit that kind of pitch? How does his arm feel? The pitcher also has to be aware of his arousal level. Did he over-try and put too much on the pitch, or did he doubt his ability, and "ain't" the pitch? How was his concentration? These are examples of the types of things that need to be attended to right after the pitch. When things are in the groove, there is nothing to attend to and he can by-pass the next two stages and go right to refocus. It feels fine and the pitcher knows it. I find that pitchers usually become aware when something is not where it needs to be. Something feels "off"; it is not where it should be. They can just feel it. I also want to emphasize that this awareness phase is not a lengthy philosophical process but a split second evaluation.

**RELEASE**

The next step is to RELEASE or let go of any inappropriate tension or negative thoughts. It is critical to let go of the thoughts the pitcher has about that pitch or "get the monkey off the back" and focus on the next pitch. Some athletes use self-talk (cussing), others tighten muscles and release them to let go. The athlete needs to know what works for him and that there are a multitude of methods that can be used "to let it go."

The most common type of release, the verbal explicative (shout, damn, fudge, son-of-a-
gun, or any variation), is done unconsciously. For the verbal release to be productive, there should be some purpose put into it. Instead of merely saying the word used out of habit (no awareness), put anger, frustration or garbage into the word and let the word carry the negativity out of the thought process. If your word is “shout” and the umpire makes a bad call, recognize your anger and then release it by placing the frustration on “shout” and let it go. The player should do this in a manner that demonstrates that he/she is not out of control; but rather that they are intense and committed to their execution.

Other methods of releasing garbage could be grabbing some dirt and throwing it down, adjusting your cap, moving to a certain part of the mound, or whatever works for you. What becomes critical is that you use a physical cue to serve as a trigger to release whatever is raising your level of arousal. Also, what works for one person may not work for another and what works for a pitcher one time may not be effective the next; therefore, a variety of techniques can assist in working through the adversity and getting back on track.

REGROUPING

The next phase is to REGROUP or center yourself to acquire the appropriate attitude, focus and intensity to meet the demands of the situation. I emphasize having some type of physical performance-related position that you return to in order to attain self-control. Many times I use the image of a warrior, focused right here, right now. This regrouping phase makes certain that the pitcher is in control of himself. The pitcher should have a good idea of how he carries himself when he is confident and this is the body position he should go to.

The pitcher’s body language conveys a definite message to the hitter. If he hangs his head the opposition knows he is hurting and it will only serve to boost their confidence. If he holds his head up, he portrays a look of confidence and he can even trick himself into believing it. Or, to put it simply, “Fake it until you make it.” While reading this chapter, drop your head and shoulders and hunch your back. Start telling yourself what a terrible person you are, how you can never achieve your dreams, all of your hard work is wasted effort, and you picked the wrong goal. Repeat this over and over again while you sit hunched over. Now, stop. Take a deep belly breath, pull your head and sternum up, and feel the confidence level rise. It is difficult to carry your body confidently and have self-defeating thoughts racing through your head at the same time. When you were hunched over and telling yourself what a rotten person you were, did you feel like it was valid. When you took a deep breath and sat up, did you feel how your perception of your confidence level changed? A good place to play with regrouping is on the days a pitcher throws in the bullpen. On the days a pitcher does not have his best stuff, he needs to really work on regrouping and at least be centered and balanced to make the best of what he has. Also this position and attitude will help him maintain a centered, balanced perspective in which he can compensate and adjust as needed without all the emotions distorting his perspective. Even though I have used a baseball pitcher for an example, these same techniques can easily be used with all types of performers.

REFOCUSING

Having established self-control, the next “R” is REFOCUS or establish your plan for the next pitch. This is where you shift from self-control to the performance. When a pitcher throws a good pitch, there is nothing to release and often no need to regroup, but he does have to refocus on the next pitch. Thus, release and regroup can be by-passed and he can go right to this step. This focusing on the next pitch helps him to not take it for granted but helps in staying with and committing to the plan. Becoming too confident and not giving the performance the proper attention and respect can get one into trouble. Too often this is what occurs when the pitcher is on automatic pilot and all of a sudden he gets hit hard. He was taking it for granted and was not giving it enough focus.
I want to emphasize at this point that I do not want the athlete to over-think but to give it
the proper amount of attention and that amount is determined by learning from previous
experience and knowing what works best for him/her.

When the pitcher focuses, I use a two-phase approach. First, scan. Know the situation
because the situation changes from pitch to pitch. Next, make your plan for dealing with the
situation. This phase is a conscious thought process and it is what makes the difference between
a thrower and a pitcher. When one pitches, thinking is involved. The final phase of refocusing
is to truly commit to the pitch that is going to be thrown. I emphasize to pitchers to commit to
the decision that is made and not wonder or worry if it is the right one.

READY

Once the pitcher is committed to the pitch, he now must shift from thinking to automatic
pilot and trusting his ability. To aid in this shift, I encourage the pitcher to check if he is ready:
take a breath or use some trigger to “click in” or “turn on” the focus. At this point it is critical
to move your attention to the task at hand. For the pitcher it may be to focus on the mitt and
connect himself to the performance.

RESPOND

The final phase is to RESPOND or trust your coaching, training and ability. The pitcher
has taken the steps necessary to obtain self-control and now it is time for action. He should stop
thinking about it and just do it. This is where the pre-pitch routine can be used to connect with
the task at hand. The pitcher may not feel totally comfortable but should trust the good feelings
and comfortableness he has instead of worrying about what is missing. Now is the time to reap
the rewards of training, free it up and trust it.

I encourage athletes to work with the “R’s” in practice in order to cope with the distractions
which often interfere with quality practice. The seven-phase approach provides a framework
that can be adjusted to meet the specific needs of the athlete (not all the pitchers use the seven
“R’s”, rather they use what works for them). The key is what modifications a player makes to
provide a more systematic approach to cope with the situation by recognizing when he is out of
the zone. This framework of being in control of oneself, focusing on the task at hand and trusting
it also has to be adjusted to meet the sport-specific demands. For example, a downhill skier
going 70 mph is not going to have time to recognize, release, regroup, refocus, ready and respond
when he misses the gate. They may just use recognize, release, and refocus. I want to emphasize
that the “R’s” are not a long, drawn out procedure but a method which has worked for me and
may work for you.

SUMMARY

In this chapter I have provided the reader with the background to my approach to
performance enhancement. As discussed, my orientation is an educational approach that
focuses on the total person. I have also emphasized the need for the mental training consultant
to be flexible and work in the context of that unique team, athlete and/or situation which is
presented. Additionally, I have stressed the need to integrate the mental skills into existing
performance procedures and this is when I use the “R’s.” The “R’s” provide a model which can
be adjusted to meet individual, team and sport-specific needs. And most importantly the R’s
can help the athlete by having something to go to when compensation and adjustment are
needed.

In summary, I cannot emphasize enough that the mental training consultant be flexible and
learn to work in the context of the situation in which he/she finds him/herself. Whatever they
do, it is critical to relate the mental skills to task relevant cues that must be practiced on a daily
basis.
STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is Dr. Ravizza’s basic philosophy?
2. When working with performers, Dr. Ravizza has two major areas which he normally covers: what are these areas?
3. Explain the “R’s”. Also graphically illustrate their interconnectedness.

REFERENCES


