APPLYING SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT
This presentation will focus on three major areas - increasing awareness; the peak experience in sport; and the training and practice of psychological skills. Taken together these will provide an appraisal of what are many of the most central issues in applied sports psychology in the United States at the moment. The importance of integrating mental skills into existing practice procedures to enhance the quality of practice will be addressed. Here an approach to self-regulation that can be used by coaches and athletes will be presented. A major theme is that the athlete has limited control over what goes on around him or her but total control over how one chooses to respond to it. The presentation will include practical applications of relaxation and imagery procedures.

INCREASING AWARENESS
So often coaches claim the game is 70% mental and 30% physical but how much of the players' training involves the mental aspects? The mental skills are not magical. They can be developed with practice but first the player must develop self awareness. This awareness provides an important understanding that will help the player gain control. The player must learn to control his emotional self before he tries to control the performance. It is only by being in control of yourself that you can make the adjustments in your performance to meet the demands of the situation. The development of psychological skills can contribute to an athlete's consistent performance by learning to regulate stress level in order to focus the attention appropriately on the task at hand. Athletes will not be aware of the need to gain control unless they first identify their own ideal performance state and can contrast that state with the present one. Thus awareness is the first step to gaining control of any pressure situation. Lack of awareness in athletes is often the result of excessive concern with achieving the end result. For example, on a potential game winning penalty kick in soccer, the player often focuses on the end result or the consequences of his actions. This type of thinking only increases the pressure. The player needs to focus on the task at hand - the kicking conditions, the turf condition, target area, mentally preparing oneself for the kick itself. By doing this the athlete is totally focused on the process and is ready to react spontaneously to the situation with controlled intensity. This type of appropriate focus of attention is essential in order to maximize performance.

Moreover, the athlete's challenge is to focus on basic skills even when the athlete's pulse rate may have increased significantly. The situation can be perceived as speeded up or out of the usual perspective because of the perceived threat of the situation. In such circumstances I would suggest that the athlete be encouraged to become aware of his or her own ideal performance state and routine behaviours. Many of the techniques we talk about in sport psychology are performed instinctively by the athlete. Awareness of these instinctive routines provides the athlete with something to focus on to regain control. Sport psychologists have contributed to enhancing performance by providing a structure or consistent framework for the various mental skills the athlete has often developed and practiced haphazardly.

Goal Setting
Every sport requires athletes to execute basic skills. The athletes must stand alone and accept
the responsibility for their performance. During the off-season, individual responsibility is an even more crucial aspect since it is then that athletes must put in hours of isolated, rigorous training and self-coaching to develop and refine essential skills. Athletes must perform the skills, reflect on the feedback gained from the performance, make corrections and refinements, and then make the skills feel natural through a multitude of repetitions and refinements. In order to develop the abilities to respond the athlete must learn to set goals and implement a plan to achieve those goals.

In order to use goal setting effectively, athletes must recognize their strengths and weaknesses so that they can maximize their strengths and correct their weaknesses. Goal setting can be used to facilitate performance enhancement. At first, athletes want to be told what their goals should be, but it is essential that the athletes make the major contribution to establishing individual goals. This requires the athletes to reflect upon and evaluate their past performance. The coach gains a great deal of insight about the athletes' awareness on the basis of this evaluation of perceived strengths and weaknesses. The goals should be performance goals, such as, "I will be more consistent at the foul line by shooting 50 shots a day with the goal of hitting 60% by the end of two weeks and 65% after one month." This is different from an outcome goal, such as, "I want to improve my foul shooting." The goals should be as specific as possible and of various duration: short-term, intermediate, and long-range. Goal setting requires awareness because the athlete first sets the goals, then strives to reach them, then proceeds to evaluate the performance feedback, and finally, adjusts the goals appropriately (Harris & Harris, 1984; McClements & Botterill, 1979).

Awareness and Skill Development

Athletes must learn the difference between merely performing skills and experiencing skills. For example, try this exercise. Raise your right arm over your head five times - one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five - and halt. Now deeply inhale as you slowly raise your right arm over your head. Breathe slow and steady as you feel the movement, experience the muscles involved, feel the gentle stretch through the different muscles, feel that extension all through the arm, and now slowly let the arm down.

The difference between just going through the motions and really experiencing the skills hinges on the awareness involved. Athletes must gain control of muscles, emotions, and thoughts and integrate them into a smooth performance. When athletes are aware and focused upon the sport experience, they exert more control over the situation. They recognize sooner when their balance is off, when too much tension is present in certain muscle groups, or when thoughts have become self-defeating. Aware athletes are more attuned to subtle fluctuations in the flow of the contest and can adjust that much sooner. Aware athletes can conserve vital energy by exerting no more than the needed effort.

Learning the Basics

Awareness requires that athletes totally focus their attention on the task. This ability must be developed in practice. Coaches want their athletes to be intense and totally involved in practice because this aids in creating quality practice time. Many coaches also realize the importance of mental training for performance, but the challenge is to find time for it. For this reason, it is important to incorporate awareness training with the physical skills that are already being performed in practice. For example, coaches and sport psychologists should encourage athletes to develop concentration as they stretch before practice by feeling the stretch and breathing into it. This type of stretching develops concentration in that the athletes are tuned in to their body as they stretch.

With the 1984 U.S. Olympic Women’s Field Hockey Team, we established a set warm-up procedure for practice to aid the athletes in mentally and physically preparing for practice. The players began by stretching, then hit the ball back and forth to work out any kinks, and then finally they executed focused hitting. Focused hitting involves hitting the ball to exact locations, for example, to the receiver’s right, middle, and left. This sequence is followed for
five minutes. These are basic field hockey skills, but there is a difference when they are done with awareness. If the player's attention is on other aspects of the day, such as a party coming up or an argument with a friend, consistency in the focused hitting drill will be impossible.

This type of drill has two major advantages for the coach. First, visible, objective performance demonstrates whether or not the athlete is concentrating. More importantly, awareness training is incorporated into the practice of basic skills. As a result, additional practice time is not required for mental training. This sophisticated approach to basic skills allows coaches to make the most of practice time by integrating mental or awareness skills training with basic fundamentals.

During one practice the California State Fullerton baseball team engaged in the focused catch drill for 90 minutes because they had not been hitting exact locations consistently. This emphasis on basics was crucial because the players realized the coach was serious about executing the basics. The difference between performing the basics and focusing on the basics lies in the players' awareness. Athletes must learn to concentrate when the pressure is on, and the focal points for concentration become the basic skills. When athletes practice physical skills and mental skills together, their confidence increases because they are ready and experienced in the subtle skill of concentration.

The All-or-None Syndrome

Awareness develops in the sport process. This is where the athlete experiences self-control. Gymnasts learning new moves cannot expect to master them immediately. A series of progressions must be worked through. Often, in the midst of this process, gymnasts feel they have either hit the move or missed. If they hit it, they are delighted, but if they miss, frustration begins to set in. The challenge is to maintain motivation throughout the hours of practice.

When athletes gain more awareness, they can make more accurate adjustments in their performance. This ability to refine the subtle intricacies of performance is a critical skill as athletes reach for maximum performance. In addition to improving self-control, the athletes experience a feeling of growing success. Even though the outcome is not perfect, players develop a more positive attitude about the skill and will keep their motivation level where it needs to be.

Playing the Edge of Peak Performance

To reach their full sport potential, athletes must learn to play the performance edge. For example, they must learn to control that delicate balance between power and grace. Every sport has components that must be balanced appropriately to maximize performance. This type of control necessitates that athletes be aware. They must monitor their performance in order to recognize when it is at its peak. In athletic training and conditioning, there are many times when athletes push too hard or do not push hard enough. At such times, the athletes need to relate to their movement experience with the precision of a surgeon so that they can make needed adjustments. For example, a runner constantly monitors her body for subtle messages so that she can make adjustments to reach that edge of peak performance.

Awareness in Managing Performance Stress

To move consistently toward peak performance, each athlete must know and be aware of his or her own experience of optimal performance. The athlete has to learn to control the excitement of the sport situation so that his or her energy can be channeled into the performance, or to reorganize when the arousal level is too low and activate it as needed. To gain this control the athlete must learn how competitive stress affects individual performance. The first step is to be aware of one's arousal level and then to adjust it as needed. The athlete must recognize which situations or stressors tend to negatively affect his or her performance. Knowledge of the stressful areas allows for the development of a strategy to prepare and cope
effectively with them. For example, playing in front of a crowd or in the presence of scouts is stressful; thus, the athlete can mentally prepare to deal with the situation to avoid surprise. The athlete has time to get support from teammates and the coaching staff and also to develop his or her own strategy.

Once the athlete understands the stressors, the next step is to be aware of the way that stress is experienced, because the manifestations of stress vary greatly among individuals. For example: "As the pressure mounts, my shoulders and neck tighten, my thoughts jump around, and I tend to get jittery." Changes in breathing are another bodily cue that often signals too much stress. Train your athletes to become sensitive to how their breathing responds to stress. For example, do they start to breathe more rapidly and shallowly? Do they hold their breath? Do they have difficulty breathing? These manifestations of stress may be perceived as problems, but they can be used as signals to provide feedback to the athlete as to whether the arousal level is appropriate. The athlete gains this personal knowledge by reflecting on previous performances and essentially using sport experiences like a biofeedback machine.

The athlete's consistent focus on his or her thoughts and feelings and use of appropriate interventions allow him or her to maintain an optimal performance state. Interventions may include relaxation and activation techniques, concentration methods, thought control, and basic breathing techniques. There are also times when the athlete must recognize that it is time just to flow with the experience and let it happen (Ravizza, 1984).

**Summary**

Developing awareness is a critical element of peak performance because it provides athletes with the experiential knowledge to gain control of the performance. Awareness is the first step in raising self-control in sport participation. Initially, athletes need to become aware of their ideal performance state. Next, athletes need to recognize when they are no longer at that ideal state. As athletes develop the awareness skills, they will recognize earlier when they are not focussed or aroused appropriately. This early recognition aids athletes in gaining control before it is lost. The sooner a deviation is recognized the easier it is to get back on course. Athletes with a range of interventions can use them to get their mental, emotional and physical states to the optimal level for peak performance. Among the various techniques for developing awareness, journal keeping and group discussion are particularly helpful.

**PEAK EXPERIENCE IN SPORT**

Peak experience refers to one aspect of the psychological experience that characterizes an athlete's most fulfilling psycho-emotional moments while participating in sport. This naturally occurring state of altered consciousness will be referred to as the peak experience. These rare moments, when the participant is performing optimally and experiencing heightened levels of awareness, offer great significance in advancing our understanding of the nature of optimal sport performance.

**Qualities of the Peak Experience**

The peak experience in sport is a rare personal moment that remains etched in the athlete's consciousness. It serves as a reminder of the great intrinsic satisfaction that sport participation can provide. Peak experiences during an athlete's career are relatively rare but their intensity acts as a standard, or qualitative reference point, for subjectively evaluating future performance.

The nature of the peak experience characteristically includes three common traits which are not subject to specific intervention techniques. Athletes always report the experience as temporary, nonvoluntary, and unique. Thus, the experience never produces a lasting enhanced mental state and no known available method can pinpoint its occurrence. Yet, when the peak experience does happen it stands apart from the usual game experience or practice routine.
As a precondition to a peak experience the athlete must achieve a mastery of the basic skills. This prerequisite is met when the athlete need no longer think about technical elements of skill execution. It is important to point out that circumstances or the sport environment need not be extraordinary in order for a peak experience to occur. The uniqueness lies in the way that one experiences the phenomenon. For example, a championship victory or a national record are not necessarily unique experiences. It is the quality of uniqueness that makes the participant regard the experiences as a personal treasure, greater than any trophy. The following section should expand our understanding of the components that commonly comprise the peak experience.

**Focused Awareness**

Every athletic contest has potential distractions that inhibit optimal performance by distracting the athlete's attention from the appropriate focal point. During the peak experience, the athlete's concentration is so immersed in the activity that the mental focus automatically adjusts to the task-relevant cues. The height of this focused awareness is manifested by complete absorption in the movement task and frequently includes altered perceptions about time, space, and the quality of the experience. A lacrosse player captured the essence of this focused awareness when she said, "It was a world within a world ... focused right there. I was not aware of the external. My concentration was so great I didn't think of anything else". (Ravizza, 1977, p.37).

During the peak experience, all consciousness is channeled into the present moment. Control is exercised over movement while the athlete fully lives the experience. Mental energy is not wasted dwelling on past or future actions over which there is no control. Centered focus is an internal physical and mental preparation that initially produces a balanced perspective. A woman gymnast reports, "Right before I start, I totally block out various distractions. It's as if things are melting away ... I think of the routine as a whole and it is just there and I am doing it." (Ravizza, 1982, p.10). Thus, a relationship between the athlete and the movement task is created. For example, the high jumper prepares internally by stretching and adjusting his/her body position. After this ritual is completed, the focus of attention shifts entirely to the bar, clearing all past thoughts and future distractions. At this point the athlete is centered on the high jump, ready to execute the movement.

In the midst of the peak experience the most exclusive kind of visual perceiving, listening, or feeling exists. Attention focuses appropriately upon the object of perception. The athlete observes from a nonjudging, nonclassifying perspective that heightens the viewing of the object in its entirety. This experience permits the athlete to shift instantly in response to movement cues. A football player discusses his experience of a narrow focus as follows: "This is one time I concentrated my whole being on one thing ... I am just hitting him [the ball carrier] and nothing else." (Ravizza, 1977, p.38).

In contrast to routine activities, the sport environment creates an environment that augments the individual's ability to be totally involved in the task at hand. In the peak experience context the competitor who concentrates intensely is surrounded by a state of silence where external concerns do not intrude. The focus is on execution of the appropriate movement task. The conduct of the crowd or previous playing errors are physical or mental distractions that are not part of the athlete's consciousness. A gymnast experiences complete absorption in the following manner: "It is just me and the routine; there is a complete silence. I forget time and just totally get into it ... It is strange because it is just me and the beam. I am so into it that I do not notice anything else." (Ravizza, 1982, p.9). Closely linked with this quality of intense concentration are different types of altered perceptions, the occurrence of which varies widely among athletes. There are at least three areas in which discernible variations from the usual movement perceptions are experienced: (a) the quality of the experience; (b) time disorientation; and (c) spatial alteration.

The quality of the athlete's perceived experience is heightened in that there is a quicker
and clearer focus on movement cues. The athlete experiences a sense of awe and wonder with the quality of the experience. The perception may be so rich as to include temporal and spatial changes. Time disorientation is manifested in one of two ways. For example, an entire event or segment of it might seem to slip by in the briefest of moments. On the other hand, a few seconds in time may be perceived as endless slow motion. Spatial alternation may occur in the perception of equipment, the field, and/or opposing players. Thus, the baseball player may perceive the ball as moving in slow motion and seeming larger than usual. The gymnast may perceive the width of the balance beam as wider than its objective measurements. In contrast, when an athlete is under extreme stress and lacks control of the situation, objects appear faster or sometimes smaller than usual. An extreme example of this occurs when an athlete becomes so tense that he or she hardly perceives anything (tunnel vision).

**Complete Control of Self and the Environment**

To reach specific goals in competitive situations, the athlete's dual concern is to learn to master the self and work to control the situation. The intensity of the peak experience pushes the athlete to new levels of performance in the pursuit of these goals. There is a fusion between the perfect nature of the movement and the willingness to dispense with the usual caution of not making an error. The athlete is in charge of the situation. A football player's report of his feelings of control demonstrates the individual's ultimate exercise of psychological power: "Things were under control; my body could do anything ... it was almost like my body was not there. Everything out there could in no way affect me. I could do anything I wanted." This sense of control acts as a guide for the athlete as though each movement is choreographed in advance.

**Perfection**

Athletes describe the peak experience as euphoric, memorable, and worthwhile, an event complete in itself and independent from all external circumstances. The experience of a perfect moment leads the athlete to an understanding of intrinsic satisfaction and therefore becomes a self-validating moment. A downhill skier captured this feeling of perfection with the following statement: "I felt like I was radiating in every direction, not with pressure but with joy. I felt a tremendous amount of heat. I was totally filled up with joy like a helium balloon, and it was fantastic." Comment or congratulations from a coach, another player, or spectators becomes unnecessary because the perfect quality of the experience is irrefutable and frequently transcends the final, even losing, score.

**Loss of Fear**

Physical injury and emotional fear in sport are learned from past injuries, prior mistakes in performance, and critical comments from significant others. Furthermore, many athletes are trained to be too critical of their performance. Athletes often approach competition with an orientation towards the fear of making mistakes. In contrast, during peak experiences one strives for excellence, undaunted by past mistakes and the dangers inherent in the sport. There is no doubt that more frequent injuries and mental errors will happen to the athlete whose primary motivation is to avoid mistakes. Persistent fear of failure reduces the athlete's ability to achieve total concentration because a part of his or her consciousness is distracted in evaluating ongoing performance. An athlete cannot be totally absorbed in the task at the same time trying to avoid mistakes.

**Transcendence of Self**

Athletes who are totally involved in the present, centered on the task, and feeling at the height of their power may experience harmony or oneness with the movement. Such an experience can be called transcendence of self. Athletes simply do the appropriate task without consciously thinking about it. To reach this level of intensity the athlete must surrender the usual thinking-evaluating self to the experience. The initial motivation is provided by going all out. Total involvement sets the conditions for the peak experience. The athlete has no further
control over whether a feeling of harmony will be reached.

Harmony and oneness represent a mental state in which the athlete's total self is integrated physically and mentally in the experience. The objects of perception (implements of the game) are experienced as an intricate part of the self. There is no distinction between the individual and the experience; instead, the two flow together in a unified whole. No longer are muscles fighting muscles, no longer is the athlete fighting the environment; now there is a blending of all levels between one's self, the movement, and/or the team. An Olympic cyclist describes his feelings of integration as follows: "I am at one with everything. There is no distinction between myself, the bicycle, tract, speed or anything. There is a oneness with everything."

In order for harmony to occur, the athlete must be able to execute the basic skills automatically. If one consciously criticizes ongoing performance then part of the self is not totally immersed in the activity. Rather, it is involved in giving performance commands. At the athlete learns to surrender the self to the experience, he or she becomes increasingly aware of moving towards harmony. The intense enjoyment and intrinsic satisfaction often involved with the transcendence experience demands that the athlete let the feelings occur without stopping to dwell on or evaluate them.

The athlete has to surrender him/herself to the experience. It is as if the athlete could continue moving forever, no longer having to exert himself/herself consciously. A butterfly swimmer captures the blending of self and the experience that occurs with the following comment: "I couldn't feel any pain, which is really weird, for me... take away the pain and it is effortless ... my whole body was doing it with ease." In team sports, the feeling of harmony may be experienced when each of the individuals involved blend together to form a synergy that is greater than any individual effort. Each individual feels the team "clicking", and there is a concentration and rhythm that wasn't there before.

**Peak Experience and Optimal Performance**

One way in which modern researchers have conceptualized the whole notion of optimal performance is to characterize performance as an inverted-U function. Peak experience may enhance performance because it lends insight into the nature of the athlete's consciousness while he/she is performing at an optimal level. It then becomes a matter of duplicating selected aspects of these experiences, thereby setting up the psychological foundation necessary for consistent and optimal levels of performance. For example, one aspect of the peak experience is focused awareness of what is occurring at the moment. Athletes can become more sensitive to this heightened awareness by employing relaxation, breathing, and centering techniques. Specialists (e.g. Orlick, 1980; Unestahl, 1983; Ravizza & Rotella, 1982) currently working with athletes have employed these techniques effectively in developing focused awareness and control over self and the environment in order to set the conditions for optimal performance. Whether or not a transcendental experience will occur from this is beyond our knowledge or control at the present time.

Obviously, exploration of psychological as well as physical performance requires an increased rapport between the coach and players, and between the athletes themselves. Ultimately such open-ended rapport can be useful both on and off the field. For example, when athletes share their pregame anxiety with the coach and their teammates, some of their tension will be relieved because they are no longer nourishing the illusion of being in control. They no longer need to waste energy in pretending all is well. Sometimes to just acknowledge the tension or fear helps to reduce it.

Finally, the peak experience is an intrinsic experience that is self-validating. It is vital for the athlete to have some internal feelings of value rather than to rely only on the evaluation of significant others, coaches, or teammates. The peak experience teaches the athlete an awareness of his/her own significance independent of what others have to say. Athletes gradually realize more of their inner beauty as they recognize the wealth of potential that they possess. Reflection upon the peak experience contributes to an awareness of the "ultimate
athlete" within, thereby adding to the athlete's self-confidence.

**Summary**

Like any altered state of consciousness, the peak experience is a difficult phenomenon to study and yet it has tremendous potential significance for the achievement of optimal performance in sport. We cannot guarantee peak experiences, but their occurrence gives intrinsic satisfaction and acts as a valuable reference point in the achievement of performance goals. Athletes need to develop a fuller awareness of their sport experiences in order to gain control over the self and the sport environment. As coaches and researchers, we can help the athlete develop along a path that permits each to attain his or her fullest capabilities.

**THE TRAINING AND PRACTICE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS**

How can practice sessions be made more effective to maximize the use of limited practice time? Lapses in concentration, commitment, poor execution of the basics, and sometimes even injuries, may be the result of low levels of motivation for practice. This section examines how psychological skills can be implemented during practice to increase the quality of practice time. As athletes learn to handle adversity in practice, confidence can be developed to use similar techniques to manage the stress of meet situations. Although coaches believe psychological skills training is important for enhanced performance, the problem is to find additional time during practice for the necessary psychological skills training. Often psychological skills training is conducted separately from physical training. However it is possible to integrate four aspects of the development of physical and psychological skills during practice: 1) mental preparation for practice; 2) stretching as a means of developing concentration; 3) the use of stress management techniques in practice; and 4) the simulation of pressure situation in practice.

**Mental Preparation for Practice**

A common problem for gymnasts in practice is the effect a poor performance on one piece of apparatus, or part of a routine, has on another apparatus or remainder of a routine. The gymnast recognizes the need to "let go" and this skill can be facilitated by having the athlete physically do something to trigger "letting go". Thus, if the athlete can physically do something to trigger "letting go" it will supplement the thought. For example, when a coach observes a tense gymnast, the typical response is to tell the gymnast to "just relax". Yet, these comments frequently highlight the gymnast's tension, because the coach clearly recognizes he or she is uptight. Instead, the coach should provide the gymnast with something specific to do that will stimulate relaxation, like "inhale ... exhale". Done correctly, the gymnast is more relaxed because they have a specific cue which results in relaxation.

The ability to focus on the present during practice can be applied to competitive situations where it is critical to remain immersed in the present moment (Harris & Harris, 1984; Unestahl, 1983). The "mentally tough" athlete knows how to clear the mind and redirect attention as needs be. Poor performance in one event or during one part of a routine cannot be allowed to affect another event or the remainder of a routine. As the athlete becomes conscious of doing this in practice, the self-confidence will carry over to performance situations. It is the coach's responsibility to positively reinforce the athlete when this type of "mental toughness" is displayed, and to point out during practice when the opportunity to use these psychological skills arises. By doing this the athlete has an opportunity to refine and develop his/her mental skills on a daily basis.

After the gymnast is dressed for practice, final preparation should involve a three-step approach: relaxation, setting goals for the day, and mental rehearsal. First, the gymnast goes through a brief five-minute relaxation session to release any excess tension from their previous day's activities. Second, once relaxation is achieved, specific goals are established for the day's practice. This provides direction and each apparatus is worked with a purpose. During workout, the gymnast is questioned about goals for the day. The third and final step is to mentally rehearse the skills that need to be worked on that day. These three steps allow the
gymnast to make a final separation from events of the day to the day's practice. This separation clears the mind of inappropriate thoughts so that the attention can be totally focused on practice.

**Stretching as a Means to Develop Concentration**

After the mental preparation for practice is completed, the athlete may engage in "awareness stretching". This is a period when concentration skills can be developed by incorporation of the mental aspects of one's development in the stretching movements. The stretch needs to be held 8 to 20 seconds to gain the flexibility benefits. So it will not take extra time, but instead, it is a more productive use of the time. This method requires that the athlete focus on and feel the stretch. He or she is taught to feel the tension in the muscle group and concentration upon that "sweet tension" by breathing into that tense area and gradually releasing the tension with each exhalation. This provides an opportunity to develop breathing techniques.

For example: As you are sitting, try this twisting stretch. Sit up in your chair with spine straight. Inhale, take a breath, and as you exhale, turn your abdominal and chest area to the left as far as comfortable (you can tell how far comfortable is by your ability to maintain your breathing). Now inhale ...(think "up in the spine" as you are breathing). Now twist the shoulder area as far as comfortable to the left. Next, inhale and now as you exhale, turn the head as far as comfortable. Then inhale ... and as you exhale, roll the eyes as far as possible to the left. At this point, focus on the sweet tension and breathe into the stretch for eight seconds. As you inhale feel the tension release. Now, gradually come out of the stretch by progressively releasing the eyes, neck, shoulders, chest and abdominal area. Thus, the concentration is focused as you go into the stretch, work with the stretch and come out of the stretch.

Concentration is developed by focusing on the ingredients of the stretch. When distracted, the distraction needs to be acknowledged and then pull the attention back to the stretch. This teaches the athlete to concentrate on the breath with the stretches rather than just physically stretching the body (Ravizza, 1982).

**Stress Management - Dealing with Adversity**

The Chinese symbol for crisis incorporates the symbols of danger and opportunity. Any adversity presents danger - one may fail, or get hurt. Yet the same situation presents the opportunity to go beyond previously established limitations. During practice, the athlete has to recognize when intensity and focus require adjustment so that changes can be made before self-control is lost. The athlete has to become aware of the warning signs of inappropriate stress, such as tightening up, self-doubt, becoming cautious, feeling overwhelmed or getting irritable. This recognition equips the athlete with an awareness of the need to intervene. Appropriate adjustments can be made before the pressure is too intense.

I have developed a seven-step approach to cope more effectively with the pressures specifically involved in gymnastics: 1) recognize the stressful situation; 2) acknowledge the fear or anger; 3) release or discharge the negative feelings (allow the gymnast a brief period of time to be upset but then let it go); 4) regroup and center oneself (the gymnast may have to walk away from the apparatus or in extreme cases, leave the gym for a few minutes); 5) refocus on the task at hand; 6) execute the skill with commitment and controlled intensity; and 7) have the gymnast evaluate how well he/she did at taking charge of the situation.

When the gymnast demonstrates self-control, a critical step has been achieved. The coach must recognize the importance of validating the athlete for accomplishing this in practice. The gymnast may not come back and hit the trick but the chances for success are increased by controlling one's emotional self before one tries to control a set. As the gymnast learns to handle this in practice, the more competent the athlete will become in handling adversity during a competitive pressure situation.
In practice, we supplement this seven-stage procedure with a "two-minute drill". When the gymnast is having a difficult time getting into practice, ask him/her to turn it around for just two minutes. A good example is when the gymnast is obviously overwhelmed and frustrated after ten minutes of practice. The gymnast can turn this attitude around by executing the six-step procedure for two minutes. Coaches often demand a turn around for the whole practice session; this is unrealistic when the athlete has become overwhelmed. However, two minutes is manageable and realistic for any situation. Further, once the athlete has experienced a shift in attitude, valuable experiential knowledge is gained about that athlete's unique ability to regroup. The "turn around" produces valuable information for the coach in understanding each gymnast's methods in dealing with adversity. Every time the gymnast consciously turns it around in practice, self-control is developed as evidenced by the self-discipline which is required.

Summary

The athlete needs to increase the quality of daily practices by using psychological skills to cope with the adversities that arise in practice. It is important to develop a set of mental procedures to prepare for practice so that attention is focused on the workout. As the athlete learns to manage stress in practice, the pressure of meets will be easier to manage. The simulation of competitive situations in practice, with an opportunity to discuss and work on handling stress, provides a "safe" environment to develop the necessary psychological skills and provides the coach with an opportunity to observe the athlete's coping skills. Most importantly, coaches can incorporate psychological skills into established practice procedures by encouraging their athletes to be aware of the pressures they confront daily, and by having them learn to cope effectively on a routine basis. By implementing these procedures alongside existing procedures, it does not require an abundance of additional practice time for psychological skills training.

REFERENCES & FURTHER READINGS

Garrido, A. Interview with author. Fullerton, California, 7 December 1982.