Developing the Ability to Concentrate in Sport Performances

by Kenneth Ravizza, PhD

Need Practices

As the ability to concentrate is an individual skill, athletes need to develop the specific method of concentration that is most effective for them.

Athletes vary in their abilities to concentrate and each athlete needs to develop a method that will work for him/her. Once the basic physical skills are achieved, the athlete can begin to focus on the concentration skills. These skills can be developed and rehearsed in practice sessions where the coach simulates stress situations. For example, at the end of the basketball practice, each player shoots five free shots in a row before the player leaves the gym. If this doesn't provide enough pressure, the coach can change the stressor of the situation by increasing the difficulty of the task or changing the audience.

Stressors are specific to each athlete.

It is essential for the coach to realize that each athlete will differ in terms of what constitutes a stressor. For example, some athletes thrive on people watching, others prefer to be alone. Similarly, each athlete is unique in the way that the tension manifests itself. It is helpful for the coach to become aware of the individual differences and be able to work with each athlete to identify what tension is evident.

Stress in Relation to Performance

Optimal arousal level is specific to each athlete.

The inverted-U hypothesis of arousal and performance reveals that as arousal increases, performance also increases. However, there is a point of diminishing returns where increased arousal hinders performance (see Figure 1). As coaches, you are all familiar with athletes whose practice performances are consistently good but who "choke" in pressure situations. Remember that each individual has his or her own unique optimal arousal level and this requires that each athlete determines his or her correct level. This awareness can be developed by athletes reflecting on their past performances to observe how the arousal level was with both their peak performances and poor performances. Once the athletes are aware of their optimal performance levels, they then need to learn to manage their arousal so that it works to their advantage. On some occasions it will be necessary for athletes to increase their arousal while at other times they will want to decrease it.

Five Step Approach to Reaching Optimal Arousal Level

1) Reflecting on past performances to determine if the optimal arousal level was too high or too low.
2) Learning which factors (e.g., parents, coaches, teammates) affect athletes when performing (e.g., parents watching, coaches' feedback, teammates' personal expectations).
3) Understanding and defining the stressors that affect athletes' competitive strategy orientations or how the athlete manifests competitive stress (e.g., light muscles, lack of concentration, negative self-talk).
4) Establishing that a consistent appearing stress cue (e.g., elevated shoulders) be a signal for the athletes to focus their attention on the performance.
5) Utilizing a variety of coping skills to gain control of the situation and focus attention appropriately (e.g., breathing and relaxation techniques, stretching, and imagery techniques).

Concentration as it Relates to Performance

Concentration as it relates to performance has a direct impact on the athletes' performance. Once the athletes understand how their arousal levels affect performance and they learn to control their arousal levels, they can use specific concentration techniques to "fine-tune" that optimal arousal. The concentration skills to be discussed provide the athletes with specific techniques which they can utilize in order to prepare for performances.

Centering in on the Present

To effectively control responses to stress situations which arise, the focus by athletes should be on the present and not the past or future.

Much of the stress experienced by athletes arises from dwelling on the past (Why did I drop that easy pass?) or anticipating the future (Will I drop the next one?). It is important for the athletes to maintain a "present" perspective because the present is where the stress reaction is occurring, and this is where they have the opportunity to control their responses. One technique that may be helpful in achieving this present focus is to center oneself internally. Athletes can achieve this by feeling how they are reacting to the stress of being pulled off center. They can feel the excessive tension in their body. By stretching their muscles (especially stress sensitive musculature such as the diaphragm and trapezius) and by slow, deep, controlled breathing (relaxation muscle on the exhalation), athletes can pull themselves back to balance. The breath is an important component of this technique because the breath is always occurring in the present. It is impossible to be breathing slow and steady and be emotionally out of control.

Familiarizing One's Self with the Competitive Environment

The warm up period is best utilized as an opportunity for athletes to become familiar with the total environment in which the athletes are competing. The athletes should be aware of, for example, the lighting, field and court conditions, and coaching signals. By familiarizing the athletes with the environment, they can begin to focus on the specific aspects of their performance. Any subsequent visualization should include these environmental details.

Pre-Performance Routines

The rituals and routines that athletes perform are relevant because they assist in achieving optimal arousal levels. Repeated rituals and routines that have been done many times prepare the athletes to focus concentration. By focusing on the routines and rituals, they will not be worrying about the external factors (e.g., parents and friends' observations). At this point the athletes can visualize their performances and achieve their goals more effectively or they can slowly go through the required skills.
Tuning into the Performance

Although athletes have limited control over their external environment (e.g., playing conditions) they have total control of their responses to it. The athletes, therefore, need to focus their attention on the elements of the performance subject to their control. For example, the athlete has total control of the actual physical skills such as the placement of one's hands when performing a back walk-over in gymnastics. This is why the athlete's attention should be concentrated (i.e., narrow-external), rather than worrying about the size of the crowd (i.e., broad-external).

Controlled Intensity

Performing with controlled intensity contributes to attaining personal excellence in the performance.

Once the athletes are tuned into the performance, they then begin the routine and perform automatically (total immersed in the present). Rather than block out external occurrences, they concentrate on those factors over which they have control. By tuning into the task at hand, the external distractions melt away and do not inhibit performance.

They are able to achieve this control because of the preparatory concentration techniques (as well as the physical training) they have employed. They now reach for their personal excellence; this is where the joy of performance lies.

Summary of Key Points in Developing Concentration

1. Athletes establish a centered perspective based in the present.
2. Familiarizes sell with the environment (a gymnast becomes aware of the total competitive arena, then becomes familiar with the equipment).
3. Execute the usual performance rituals as part of the centering process (e.g., imagery which includes environmental details, stretching).
4. Focuses on the task at hand (the gymnast has a specific focal point on the apparatus that he/she concentrates on).
5. Execution of the skill required with controlled intensity.

Maintaining Concentration

When to concentrate so athletes can maximize their performances varies with different sports.

Not only is it important to know how to concentrate and what to focus on, but also it is essential to know when to concentrate. Different sports require different types of concentration. For example, a golfer needs to concentrate when the shot is being taken; between shots the player's strategy must be evaluated and arousal level managed. A soccer player's concentration is more dependent upon one's position in relation to the ball and opponents. An athlete must learn to control one's arousal level and concentration in relation to the specific sport being participated in.

In football, a player should go "all out" while performing his specified tasks; once the play stops he should process the feedback of his performance (i.e., I was too aggressive). He learns what he needs to do and reflects on it as he returns to the huddle. Once he gets to the huddle he exchanges information with the other players. After this exchange the player returns in the huddle. When the huddle breaks he brings his arousal level up so that when he gets in the "set" position he is ready to go; when the play begins, he goes all out. Then the cycle begins again.

The athlete needs to learn when to focus his attention so that he can maximize his performance. In a game like football where there are 7 seconds of action and 25 seconds of preparation, the athlete needs the self-control or he will be exhausted very quickly.

Consciousness is the Key

By being consciously aware of specific concentration, athletes play an active role in appropriately applying these techniques.

Many athletes are already unconsciously implementing some of these concentration techniques. It is essential however, that they become fully aware of what these techniques are and why they are doing them. This consciousness then enables the athlete to take an active role on their behalf rather than relying on chance. For example, when an unexpected stressful situation occurs, the athlete then has some specific techniques to use instead of just hoping for the best.

Simulation in Practice

In our exploration of space, we have become accustomed to the repetition of simulated activity used to prepare the astronauts and technicians for every conceivable problem that might arise. This approach also has a beneficial application in the world of athletic competition. In the athletes' practice sessions, time should be spent simulating stressful situations.

Summary

In order to perform at their highest levels, athletes need to understand what constitutes their optimal arousal levels. An understanding of the stresses and the way that athletes manage their stress can help each athlete in maintaining one's proper arousal level. The athlete should become consciously aware and understand the methods that they use to focus their attention. As coaches, practice time should be scheduled where stressful situations are simulated so that the athlete can practice their concentration and stress management skills. In addition, it is also helpful if some time can be spent discussing the athletes' reactions to stress; thus further enables each athlete to understand his/her own unique reactions to competition.

References

