Relaxation Training for Athletes and Coaches

by Kenneth Ravizza, PhD

I. BENEFITS OF RELAXATION TRAINING

(a) Physiological Benefits of Relaxation

Benson (1978) confirmed that the body's physiological response during relaxation results in a decrease in the consumption of oxygen, rate of respiration, heart rate, and metabolism. During recovery from muscular injury, relaxation exercises are a key intervention: venous return is enhanced, reducing edema and swelling, and the body's overall energy levels recover.

(b) Psychological Benefits

Psychological relaxation reduces feelings of anxiety, promotes self-control, and encourages focus on the present moment. These mental exercises help athletes relax during high-stakes situations.

II. RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

There are many relaxation techniques available, each with its own benefits. For athletes, a modified form of progressive muscle relaxation is particularly effective. Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing and relaxing individual muscle groups in a systematic order, starting from the head and working down to the feet.

(a) Modified Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation was developed by Edmund Jacobson, M.D. in the 1930s. The technique involves tensing and relaxing specific muscle groups, allowing the athlete to focus on specific areas of tension.

(b) Systematic Relaxation

Scan the entire body for tension and tell yourself to RELAX.

This procedure can be used to complement the modified progressive relaxation program. In this procedure, the athlete systematically goes through the entire body, scanning for tension and focusing on relaxing each muscle group.

(c) Relaxation is a Skill

Relaxation is a skill that athletes can develop with practice. It is essential to learn and practice relaxation techniques regularly to achieve optimal performance.

Potential Pitfalls to Avoid

Athletes who react in a silly manner to learning relaxation skills often need the skills the most.

The level of group membership is an important factor when assessing how successful the program will be for your team. Some athletes may enjoy the novelty of learning new things and react by becoming silly, laughing, or disrupting the group. Frequently these are the athletes that need the skills the most. One suggestion is to discuss the purpose of the relaxation exercises (imposed self-control during performance) and explain how many top athletes use similar methods. However, the conduct of each athlete must demonstrate a minimum level of motivation that respects the rights of teammates. If an individual becomes disruptive, I would suggest immediate exclusion from the group. After the session is completed you can talk with the individuals who had problems to aid them in feeling less threatened for the next session.

A spontaneous muscle twitch is feedback to the athlete of a relaxed state.

A common experience as one begins relaxation training, the athlete is a spontaneous twitch at an arm or leg. This is a common experience for many people when falling.
IV. BASIC INGREDIENTS FOR A SUCCESSFUL RELAXATION PROGRAM

(a) Quiet Environment
Initially, a quiet environment excludes all distractions such as bright lights, or people walking through the room. Obviously, we have to make the best of poor conditions, but try to remove as many distractions as possible.

(b) Comfortable Physical Position
Comfort is essential because slight pain will be distracting. The position would be to take a supine position on the floor with the legs spread 18–24 inches apart and the palms facing the ceiling. If the lower back hurts, the knees should be bent (so the feet are flat on the floor) to relieve the pain. A pillow inserted under the knees or legs propped up on a chair 18 inches off the floor will have a similar effect. It is also important to wear comfortable clothing so that the breathing is not restricted.

(c) Present Focus of Attention
Focus on the present. The athlete should focus his/her attention on what is happening in the here and now. A good technique is to have the person reflect back on the previous events of the day, (e.g., waking up, eating, attending class) until they reach the present moment. This orientation to the present inhibits dwelling on past and future unfinished business surrounding certain events. The present is where the athlete has control and can make necessary changes.

Steady Slow Breathing
Breath awareness is another way to bring attention to the present.

The breath only occurs in the present. Since there is no constant focus on two things at once the breath provides a focal point for directing one's attention. Breath awareness is also an excellent centering technique for coping with stress in a competitive environment.

By centering, an athlete can, within a few seconds, gain control of the situation and direct attention to the present.

The type of breathing during centering will be shallow abdominal diaphragmatic breathing (see Figure 1). The breath originates from the abdominal area and moves up toward the chest. Thus, the abdomen rises with the inhalation and recedes with the exhalation. Initially, the hands should rest on the abdomen so that the person feels the movement. The breathing is through the nose and the athlete focuses on smooth breathing, transition between the inhalation and exhalation. The ultimate result of this type of breathing is a calming effect (Acap, 1976).

(d) Specific Relaxation Techniques

There are many methods to control one's ability to relax. From the techniques which I have found most successful with athletes are those that are practical and which can be learned in relatively few sessions. Generally, I use a form of modified progressive relaxation (Jacobs, 1978) or systematic relaxation. Clearly, other methods are beneficial (e.g., meditation, autogenic training) and may be more appropriate but they often take greater self-discipline and attention (Wilson & Bird, 1980–81). Biofeedback training has been found to be effective but the problem is that most coaches do not have the equipment or expertise. In the appendix some suggestions are provided on implementing modified progressive relaxation and systematic relaxation.

(e) Imagery or Visualization
Guided imagery is aided by a relaxed state since the attention is more focused. The athlete to experience playing the game or developing specific skills. The emphasis should be on trying to recreate the experience with as much sensual feeling as possible (e.g., feel the sun, feel the wind, smell the gym, hear the crowd). There is not space in this article to fully explain every technique but it is important to understand how it relates to the relaxation training.

(f) Moving Out of the Relaxed State
Moving out of the relaxed state must be done gradually. The athlete should be instructed to slowly wiggle the fingers of each hand (i.e., this may appear difficult but they should be assured that it is a normal reaction), then move the hands from one position to another, roll from side to side. At this point, they can stretch out and then put their knees up, lean the chest to stretch the lower back. Upon standing up, they can jump up and down and shake their bodies out. After everyone is refreshed, talking about the experience and pointing out that this skill is available to them at any time they feel tense aids the athlete in gaining control of the situation.

V. PROGRESSING FROM A CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENT TO COMPETITIVE SITUATIONS

It is important to explain to athletes that relaxation training taught in a non-threatening environment so that they can use similar skills in a sporting context. Below is a progression that can be used to make this transition:

1. Learn modified progressive relaxation (as discussed above) first because it is the most basic procedure.
2. Learn to systematically scan the body and release unnecessary tension (as discussed above).
3. Practice relaxation skills with planned distractions (stimulate competitive context).
4. Carry the relaxed feeling to the standing position and allow the athlete to scan the body for any unnecessary tension from this position.
5. The final phase is to learn to control the arousal level in the competitive situation. This means that the athlete learns to recognize when they are under or over aroused and can control their intensity as needed. A major point and one that is often confused in relation to relaxation is that we do not want the athletes deeply relaxed before competition but we want them in their appropriate arousal level. The relaxation training provides the basic skills for athletes to begin to control their emotional reactions in competitive situations. Thus, when they are told to relax they will have something specific to do such as tightening a fist and putting all the tension there and then releasing. Using breathing techniques to regain their present focus, or quickly stretching the body to pull it into balance.

VI. GUIDELINES FOR THE COACH

1. The coach should read the pertinent literature on relaxation so that there is a definite theoretical understanding of the procedures.
2. The coach should engage in relating relaxation techniques with his/her own personal levels of stress, in a controlling fashion.
3. Develop a program that meets the needs of the team. The relaxation training should be done as a part of the practice session. It does not have to be done every day but, at the very least, on a weekly basis. The sessions will generally last 15–20 minutes. A good time for a relaxation session is at the end of practice or when the players are exhausted, making mental errors. When excessive tension manifests itself during practice, or when extrapolated from meaningful academic work and finals are closing in on team members.

For the Coach – Recall and Insight
1. List the key ingredients for a successful relaxation program.
2. "What steps should the coach follow in developing higher relaxation skills?"

References


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For the Coach – Recall and Insight
1. List the key ingredients for a successful relaxation program.
2. "What steps should the coach follow in developing higher relaxation skills?"