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CHAMPIONSHIP PERFORMANCE

Off the Field

Improve Team Race Relations

■ Championship Performance Coaching Volume 2 Preview

This month we are featuring five chapters from our new book series, *Championship Performance Coaching Volumes 1 and 2*. In this issue we preview *Volume 2: 101 Practical, Proven Sports Psychology and Team Building Strategies to Help Achieve Your Dream Season*. The web page to order is now up and running and a special form will be included with the October print issue.

■ Evaluate Meetings with Outside Observer

Here is a strategy to improve team meetings. Enlist an outsider – it could be a team manager, former coach or assistant athletic director to observe your next meeting. Ask that person to list the positive and negative aspects of the meeting in one column.

Example: Teammates didn't interrupt one another. *Example:* Two members dominated the discussion while the rest of the team stayed quiet.

Have a summary typed up and show the list to the team. Seeing constructive comments along side where they need to improve can help meetings run more effectively. Repeat with a different observer periodically.

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There is no denying that racial tension is alive and well on college campuses across the country, but there is not a universal solution to remedy this universal problem. Add in possible animosity felt toward black athletes by other African-Americans and whites on campuses, and the problem becomes even more compounded. Former Northwestern basketball coach, the late Ricky Byrdson said that it's hard for a black athlete anywhere because almost every major college campus has a dominant white population. They already start from a feeling of discomfort.

Racism in sports is no different from racism anywhere else since the beginning of time: People are afraid and mistrustful of what they don't understand. Most white football players disparage rap music, which some of their black teammates take pleasure in playing loudly in the locker room boom boxes. Many blacks have been insulted by whites throughout their lives. It's hard for them to suddenly drop their defenses because the guy next to them wears the same uniform.

Let's start with racial attitudes. *Where do athletes get their attitudes about race?* First from their parents. Their views will have a profound effect on the way athletes see other races or cultures. Second is the surroundings the athlete grows up in. Did the athlete only associate with people of his or her own race? This makes it more difficult to relate to teammates that are not from a similar background. It's certainly easy to see why blacks or Latin players separate themselves sometimes. It's a comfort level thing.

Essayist Roger Rosenblatt believes negative racial attitudes come from fear and ignorance: "Everybody perceives something different when it comes to race. The natural response is to back off in some way. For the worst of those who back off, it takes the form of distrust and even hatred. For the best, there is a type of shy retreat."

Kay James, Dean of Regent University and one of America's leading experts on

race relations believes the root of racism is a very sinful heart: "Racism is a heart problem, a character problem, an integrity problem, and that's why I think when we have a conversation about how we overcome race in America. It's important to talk openly on this issue. That will happen as relationships are formed in communities, or on sports team, as people spend time together and get to know one another. Stereotypes are dispelled when people have the opportunity to set aside their preconceived notions, their prejudices, and they get to know each other as individuals."

Where is the sports world when it comes to race relations? You will get some very differing views depending on the source. All agree that sport teams have made progress but still have a long way to go.

Former NFL player Tim Green shared some powerful and sometimes disturbing insights into the mindset and attitudes of black and white players.

According to Green, "I would never hear a white player use racial epithets out loud in a locker room, but to hear whites secretly whisper 'nigger' was not uncommon. While some whites declare their tolerance for their black teammates with hand slaps and professions of admiration during a game, off-the-field they secretly spread their dislike for black teammates.

"You know how they are" was the code phrase white players used when referring to their black counterparts' stereotypical propensities for valuing style over substance (looking good by making big plays versus winning) and cheating.

He spoke bluntly about racial attitudes: "It is sometimes easy for white bigots to justify their own prejudice when they hear the way many black athletes talk about and treat one another. For one black player to call another 'nigger,' either as a term of affection or insult, was a regular occurrence.

"Mirroring Technique" Helps Recruiting

There is a breakthrough sales technique in the business world that can help you make deeper connections with your players, and more importantly, with the kids and family members you may be recruiting. The technique is called mirroring and it can help you create powerful connections with others. This behavior, often called "the chameleon effect," causes others to like and trust you more. Professional networkers, negotiators and salespeople say they use mirroring to help them engage more deeply in a conversation and understand the person they're talking with.

Examples: Retail salespeople who were told to mimic the nonverbal and verbal behavior of customers sold more products and left customers with

a more positive opinion of the store. In another study, 62 students were assigned to negotiate with other students. Those who mirrored others' posture and speech reached a settlement 67% of the time, while those who didn't reached a settlement 12.5% of the time.

Researchers using brain-imaging technology in new ways have recently discovered that these shared behaviors go beyond simple mimicry. Scientists using functional MRIs to study listeners and speakers have found that they are "dynamically coupled," with speakers' and listeners' brains reacting and adapting to signals from each other.

The brain's mirroring capacity is the basis for this interplay of signals and reactions, and nonverbal cues enhance it. This kind of alignment fosters closeness and trust. "The extent to which people are able to create this brain-to-brain coupling makes them more powerful," says communications executive Noah Zandan. "It's useful in any environment where collaboration is going to be more helpful than hostility."

Deliberately trying to mirror another person's behavior without being truly engaged can backfire, however. Others are likely to notice and see it as an attempt at manipulation. "We tend to like people who imitate us—as long as we don't notice that they're doing it," says Chris Frith, a neuropsychology professor at University College London.

Sales trainer David Hoffeld tells his own salespeople to match the pace of prospective clients' conversations, **urging those who speak slowly to speed up when talking with prospects who are in a rush and to take it down a notch for those who speak slowly and deliberately.** Otherwise, he tells his salespeople, "you're going

to drive them nuts."

Hoffeld says mirroring another person's body language helps him focus on the person's needs and understand his viewpoint. "It's not something you do to someone. It's something you do with someone," says Hoffeld, author of "The Science of Selling." He adds, "The very process of mirroring will help you keep your focus where it should be—on the other person."

When he began a pitch to a chief executive officer who was relaxed and leaning back in his chair, Hoffeld sat back too, mirroring the executive's posture, gestures and choice of words. As the CEO became more interested in the training program Hoffeld was selling, he leaned forward and began gesturing with both hands. Hoffeld did the same, "and we were off to the races," said Hoffeld. He soon made the sale.

Recommendation: Here are three do's and don'ts when it comes to the mirroring sales technique. **Do:** 1) Build a connection first. Make listening and understanding the other person your priority.

2) Start by nodding and tilting your head as you listen.

3) Try matching the other person's vocal tone and pace.

If that works, move on to mirroring gestures and posture. **Don't:** 1) Try to fake it by pretending to be interested when you're not. You'll almost certainly be found out.

2) Mirror negative nonverbal signals, such as crossing arms in front of your body or stepping back.

3) Try to copy the person's gestures, movements and expressions exactly.

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Race Relations in Sports, cont.

Many whites can't understand how the use of a word could be so common between blacks, yet at the same time so offensive when used by whites. They see this as hypocritical.

Black players will also show their own bigotry against other black players over varying degrees of darkness, perpetuating the very notion that they abhor - that somehow a person's worth is tied to their skin color."

A black who is 'too white' is looked upon suspiciously by his black teammates. If he acts white, i.e. doesn't distinguish himself as being black by his dress, music, speech, or associations, he is quietly accused of trying to be white.

This type of black player would seem like a logical bridge between the chasm of misunderstanding, but often times would be scorned and burned from both sides of the locker room.

Despite all these problems, Green believes racism is slowly being eroded in professional sports: "During my ten years in the NFL, I actually witnessed a decline in racism. When I first arrived in the league in 1986, players typically segregated themselves when off the playing field. On the airplane, blacks sat in one section, whites in another. Unless a coach forced interracial roommates, as some wisely do, voluntary segregation was the rule."

Possible solutions: 1) As a coach, stress the common experiences players have. All of them have the common experience of working hard, sweating, bleeding, playing with injury and preparing themselves to compete athletically at the highest levels. With so much in common, there is no excuse not to push the smaller things - music, diction and dress - aside.

2) It's time to get past the nonsense. For football teams, give blacks a fair shake at positions like quarterback and center and whites an equal opportunity at positions like safety and running back. Don't ever discriminate based on racial stereotypes when selecting players for certain positions, no matter what the sport.

3) Force integration. Mix room assignments with players of different races and backgrounds for road games.

4) Have a zero tolerance policy on inflammatory speech. Declare the use of words like "nigger" off limits, even between black teammates in the locker room.

5) Suggest that players pair off and during the summer go visit another player's home and spend at least a weekend there.

6) Encourage participation in off-the-field activities and groups that already have an atmosphere of racial harmony. (Fellowship of Christian athletes is one such example.)

Having teammates visit each others' places of worship is another idea that can build understanding and promote racial healing. Serve together by feeding the homeless or building a Habitat for Humanity house.

7) Have forums to openly air differences. Former Colgate basketball player Adonal Foyle, a black from the Virgin Islands, was shocked by the race problems he first encountered in the United States. Foyle said American college campuses are the best places to begin eradicating racism. He suggested the integration of specialty houses for all races, required diversity classes for all students and frank and open forums to discuss racial problems.

"There should be a platform where everyone on campus says what they want to say, no holds barred," he said. "Whites sometimes force themselves to stifle their opinions on race, and vice versa with blacks. The open discussion will shake the university up a bit, but it really needs to happen. Buttons need to be pushed to find out what is really going on."

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Winning Ways

■ 3 Ways Ritual Helps Prescott

NFL rookie Quarterback Dak Prescott has a unique pre-game ritual. The night before a game will text his late mother, something he has done since college. He won't hit send, but he will keep the note, like he has so many other notes over the past three years.

The ritual helps from a mental stand-point in three ways. 1) It alleviates pressure to perform for others. He isn't thinking about what the fans think, what the coaches think or what his teammates may say or not say about his performance.

Thoughts like, "I've got to win this game for such and such" are gone.

2) It gives him something bigger to play for. It takes the noise of his self-pressure to perform and simplifies things into a goal to play his best to honor his late mother.

3) It gives him internal motivation instead of needing anything external to play for. This eliminates distractions.

Do you have a player who gets uptight worrying about all the things he or she can't control before a game? Have them dedicate a game to just one person, a mentor or family member, alive or deceased. This can help them be less hard on their own performance and become less of a "people pleaser."

■ Come Back from a Devastating Loss Early in the Season

If your team suffers a humiliating early season loss, confidence can waver. One way to get your team to believe in themselves again is to remind them of past success. If the team has started slowly in recent seasons and played better in later games, remind them they are a team that keeps getting better as the season progresses. If there is no positive recent memory to draw on, bring up a historical success within the program.

Example: One year we got hammered 31-0 in the season opener, but we came back to win the conference championship.

By planting seeds of success, you give your players something to look forward to instead of sulking about the defeat.

Player Coach Agreements Build Team Trust

It's one of the toughest issues that coaches face today. *Are coaches merely spectators regarding how their players behave off the playing fields? In what way and to what extent can coaches favorably influence players' behaviors? How can coaches create supportive team environments which help convey positive public images of their teams?*

Coaches of successful programs of integrity hold players accountable for their behaviors both on and off the playing field. Players who misbehave should be disciplined in educational and rehabilitative ways, not merely punished. Most coaches control behavior by establishing and endorsing "team rules." These alone don't always allow coaches opportunities to favorably influence players' behaviors and create and maintain a supportive environment.

Another approach that can be used in conjunction with team rules is "Player-Coach Agreements." The intent of such "agreements" is threefold: 1) To help players develop/improve desirable behaviors and/or correct undesirable behaviors. 2) To involve players in assisting the coach create a supportive team environment. 3) To protect and enhance the public image

Performance Enhancement

Watch Out for Over Analysis: Learn Like Kids

When just starting to learn new skills, small kids use a trial and error process. They try something and if it doesn't work, they try it again. Very little coaching is involved or needed. The kid attacks skill learning with wild abandon and enjoyment. They "fool around" with different ways to perform a skill. They experiment. As they fool around and experiment, they learn a feel for the skill.

A feel of control, balance, body manipulations that fit each individual's muscle and bone structure. The child does not become paralyzed by analysis. When children first learn to swing a bat and want the ball to go to the target, they simply swing to the target.

of the team.

When developing player-coach agreements, coaches may want to involve team captains in order to place responsibility with the players to fulfill the terms of the agreement. The terms must be fair, relevant, and appropriate to achieving desirable behaviors and correcting undesirable ones. Procedures for implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the terms of such agreements must be clearly specified and carried out according to established timelines. Agreements should be signed and dated.

Recommendation: Here are some areas to be included in the agreements:

1. Academic performance and progress. Require student-athletes to achieve certain standards within established timelines and prescribe participation in specific academic support services/programs supervised and monitored by specific individuals, e.g. study sessions, tutorials, writing or skill labs.

2. Interpersonal relationships and behavior toward others. Require student-athletes to examine and strive to improve their relationship skills in working with

others, e.g. teammates, coaches, faculty, press, etc. Establish procedures for monitoring and evaluating student-athletes' progress.

3. Lifestyle and leisure-time management. Require student-athletes to examine and strive to improve overall lifestyles and ways they spend leisure time. Require personal counseling sessions with specific individuals for prescribed time periods to achieve desired outcomes, i.e. goal setting, time management, and organizational skills. Establish procedures for monitoring and evaluating progress.

Player/Coach agreements improve behavior because athletes know what is expected of them, what actions they must take, and that their performances will be monitored and evaluated. These agreements also help build a supportive team environment and positive public image.

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Recommendation: Athletes sometimes need to learn the skills the same way little kids do. They should focus on feel. The mind must be clear with a simple single focus. Often times, athletes become so serious they forget to have fun and enjoy the learning process. Fun and enjoyment help to cope with the frustrations of learning. To learn like a kid, athletes should have fun, experiment, and freewheel their movements.

The child's mind simply sees where the ball is to go and the body responds freely and naturally.

As athletes get older, they become victims of paralysis by analysis. They think there is only one way to perform a skill and try so hard to emulate this "correct" skill movement that they do not let their natural movements and feelings come into play. As a result, when attempting a skill, an athlete's body moves in a jerky manner instead of a flowing manner. Trying to focus on too many movements clouds the mind and creates confusion. The confused mind sends uncertain impulses to the muscles and it is only natural for the muscles to respond uncertainly.

How to Counter Intimidation Games

Note: The following report on intimidation in sports is addressed directly to athletes.

“The intimidation factor” is commonplace in competition. Some athletes will seek to get a mental edge by taking you out of your game.

Intimidation takes many forms such as:

- Trash talking before/during a game.
- A brush-back pitch to shake up a hitter.
- An extra shove after a whistle was blown.
- Stare-downs or crazy antics.

No matter what intimidation is used, the goal is the same - to try to get in your head and take your focus away from the game. When you give into intimidation, you become agitated, angry and anxious which eats away at your confidence.

If you focus on the antics of a rival then you are not attending to what you need to do to perform at your peak. Intimidation challenges an athlete’s level of mental toughness.

If you can learn the power of focus, you

can turn a fellow competitor’s attempt at intimidation to work in your favor.

Example: In the Olympics, swimmer Chad le Clos tried his best to intimidate and gain a psychological advantage over his rival, Michael Phelps. Le Clos shadow-boxed in front of Phelps as the two were mentally preparing for their semi-final showdown.

According to Phelps, “I just had music going on in my head. I had thoughts going on in my head, spitting water a little bit all over the place, so I was in my own zone.”

Phelps was stoic as he stared forward and listened to his headphones. At one point, Phelps couldn’t help but notice le Clos’ antics, but Phelps used the intimidation as motivation. He used the intimidation attempt to fuel his performance rather than allowing his emotions to run wild.

“I made sure I left everything in the pool,” Phelps noted.

Recommendation: *How can you turn intimidation into motivation?*

First, you should realize that your opponent sees you as a threat or there would be no need for them to seek an edge through intimidation.

Second, you need to pay attention to getting ready to compete at your highest level. What is your game strategy? What should you focus on in that moment? Go through your pre-competition routine.

Lastly, if your opponent sees that their antics are not working, soon those antics will lessen or stop.

Here are two tips for turning intimidation into motivation:

1) Focus your eyes away from the distraction. Pick a neutral point in the athletic environment or, if you can, close your eyes and listen to music or review your game strategy.

2) Next, remind yourself that you have the edge because your opponent definitely views you as a threat. Let your opponent burn out their energy while you maintain a sense of calmness.

Patrick Cohn, Ph.D. www.peaksports.com

Handle 5 Types of Meeting Disruptive Personalities

Some people are just plain difficult to deal with. Other unintentional behaviors can really slow team meetings down. Here are suggestions to keep different personality types under control.

- **The clown** ridicules others, making jokes at their own expense.

Strategy: Redirect this person’s attention with serious questions. Don’t be too hard on them however. It’s good to have someone to lighten the mood sometimes.

- **The cynic** opposes the team in everything and argues needlessly.

Strategy: Ask him or her to share the “why” behind their attitude. Then challenge the rest of the team to find ways around the problems.

- **The dominator** monopolizes the meeting. *Strategy:* Acknowledge their point, but quickly shift focus elsewhere. When he or she pauses, redirect the conversation by asking specific team members to share their reactions to what was said.

- **The loner** withdraws into silence or indifference. *Strategy:* Draw a loner into the discussion by going around the room asking for input. Ask each team member

to write ideas down on paper first - and don’t allow anyone to pass.

- **The movie star** craves attention so this person continually draws the discussion back to their plays or accomplishments.

Strategy: Minimize distractions by being attentive and talking to the “star” before and after the meeting. During the meeting, keep your star occupied by asking him to take notes and read the highlights back at the end of the meeting.

“ Part of being mentally tough means you do what's in the best interest of the team, when it's not in your best interest. ”

Bill Belichick, Pro Football Coach

The Psychology of Finishing Strong

Do your athletes have trouble finishing off an opponent in the closing moments of a match or competition? The key question raised by many athletes in this situation is, "How do I close the competition in such a way that the pressure of performance doesn't suddenly overwhelm me?"

Most people can relate to being in the position of having victory in your grasp when a force beyond your control does you in. This struggle to stay in top form is exemplified in many sports.

You see it in the golfer who shoots 7 strokes below his handicap on the front nine, only to fall apart on the back.

You see it in a basketball team that's up 12 points with five minutes left to play against the best team in the country, when suddenly all their shooters go stone cold and they end up losing.

One of the main reasons athletes have trouble finishing strong has little to do with the actual pressure of the situation or the status of the opponent, but instead it is the athletes perception of the situation. The psychology of winning and finishing off opponents is directly linked to what is going on "upstairs."

Recommendation: To insure your athletes don't steal defeat from the hands of victory, tell them to: 1. *Change the mindset.* The great athletes want to be in action when the game is on the line. Michael Jordan always wanted the ball with two seconds left so he can take control and win the game for his team. Joe Montana thrived on the pressure of the nearly impossible (e.g. directing the two minute drill the length of the field.)

The best athletes perform their best when their back is up against the

wall. Every athlete must first develop an acceptance of these tough situations. They should gravitate towards them rather than away. Athletes must convince themselves that these situations are opportunities for them to show their stuff. They must believe these situations will bring out their best efforts.

To do this, "act as if." By pretending like they are the greatest players around who love pressure situations, it will soon happen for real. Another great practical application is to have your players watch film of other team's great comebacks and great upsets. By doing so over and over again, they reinforce a winning message.

2. *Practice every conceivable twist* that can occur in a match or game. This will have athletes prepared to handle the tough situations that arise. Make practices as pressure-filled as possible.

3. *Mentally rehearse strong closings.* On a daily basis, athletes should practice seeing themselves finishing their matches or games the way they would like them to turn out. Remember that athletes should be in a relaxed state before they do any imagery exercises. The best time is at night before going to sleep.

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■ Peak Performance Bullets

■ Four Team Building Ideas

These ideas build team harmony, reduce tension and foster a positive atmosphere.

1) Mark off significant progress when certain goals are met with "mini-celebrations." For example, throw a pizza party when the team increases assist-to-turnover margin for a certain amount of games in a row. Don't necessarily make the celebration tied to the number of victories.

2) Post a blank sheet of paper with headings such as "Favorite, Movie, or Musical Performer" and "One unique aspect about myself" in the locker room and let players fill out the list. They'll learn more about one another and have fun in the process. This generates a relaxed atmosphere.

3) Surprise players sporadically with a special treat - and make sure they don't expect it. *Example:* Cut practice short or make running drills optional.

4) Use a dart board to offer bonuses. *Example:* If a player earns the privilege (by going the extra mile in practice or making a big play in a game) give them a throw at the dart board. On the board have different "prizes" that can be distributed.

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■ 3 Ways to Reverse Losing Streaks

Here are three ways athletes can counter a losing streak.

1. **Process-Focus** – Don't worry about how the game might end... Instead, focus on executing the game strategy - this will give you the greatest chance for victory.

2. **Overcome Generalizations** - You can't buy into the idea that we always lose to this team or we are on a losing streak or this team is always better.

3. **Nameless or Numberless** - Don't label your opponents as a team that has your number. Treat them as another team that you'll play to your strengths to win the game.

Determine Optimal Anxiety Levels

The following report on dealing with nerves and getting to your optimal anxiety level is addressed directly to athletes.

Feelings of nervousness—things like sweaty palms, racing heart, jitteriness, tight muscles, doubts, worry and difficulty concentrating—are common experiences for many athletes, especially before and during competition. Furthermore, at times, this nervousness can have an adverse effect on performance. *What are you to do?*

1) Change Your Perspective (Interpretation)

Anxiety can hurt performance, but not all the time. Unfortunately, it is often the case that when an athlete experiences anxiety, or nervousness before a competition, he or she automatically thinks, “Oh no, I’m nervous—this isn’t good. Things are going to end badly.” Being nervous should not necessarily be an “oh no experience” as anxiety does not always hurt performance. In fact, various theories put forth to help us understand the relationship between anxiety and performance suggest that anxiety can actually help performance—up to a point. Think about it from a practical perspective. Have you not found that sometimes a little worry or jitteriness gets you primed to compete?

For example, the increased arousal before competition can elevate your heart rate and raise your body temperature, helping prime the body’s physiological systems. So, be cautious of mentally “tagging” any nervousness you experience as detrimental and something you need to get rid of. Instead, be aware of what you are experiencing and change your perspective regarding anxiety and its role on performance. See anxiety as something that can help performance, but take appropriate steps to keep it in check.

2) Determine Optimal Anxiety Levels For Yourself

If some anxiety seems to facilitate performance, but experience (and research) tells us too much anxiety hurts performance, what are you supposed to do? How much nervousness is right? The answer depends on you.

That is, optimal anxiety is very individualized; some athletes perform best with low anxiety, others with moderate anxiety and still others with higher anxiety levels. Think back on past competitive experiences to begin to sort out what is best for you. Prior to your better performances, how nervous or anxious were you? What specifically were you thinking and feeling? Reflect back on poorer performances to give you a means of comparison. Most athletes will see a pattern emerge that links certain levels of nervousness to better performances. Now, think about trying to attain this identified level of anxiety as opposed to thinking “oh no” when experiencing pre-competition anxiety.

Learn, practice and implement anxiety management skills. Note that the skills to manage anxiety can be basic and easy to understand, but they are hard to implement effectively when needed most. That is why we still witness elite-level athletes tensing up and double faulting on critical points in tennis, or missing free throws and making critical errors during a basketball game. If you are more plagued by the physical manifestations of anxiety, your pre-competition goals should focus on calming your body using such skills as stretching, moving around, so as not to get tight, light massage or deep, controlled breathing.

When mental anxiety tends to be excessive, your goal should be to calm the mind—effective skills include using positive self-talk, focusing on process goals (as opposed to outcome goals), distracting oneself so as not to think about being worried and reminding oneself of past successes to build confidence. Another important note is that these skills must be practiced.

Practice them during training sessions by setting up situations that will elevate your anxiety and present an opportunity to practice your anxiety management skills.

3) Understanding Underlying Causes of Excessive Anxiety

While it is important to have skills to manage anxiety (increase or decrease as needed), it is equally important to identify the “whys” behind anxiety. Why are you more nervous today than you were before the game last week? **Research indicates that the greater the importance you place on an event, the more elevated your anxiety will become.** That is why you will typically feel greater anxiety before the state championship meet than you will before a seemingly meaningless inter-squad competition. Additionally, the greater the uncertainty surrounding the event, the more elevated your anxiety will be.

You are probably thinking, “Of course there is uncertainty. Isn’t that the nature of competition—that there is uncertainty about who is going to win?”

Yes, but you might be able to moderate this uncertainty. Having a sole focus on the outcome (i.e., winning), as opposed to focusing on the things you can do to perform at your best, is probably going to increase anxiety. Therefore, to manage pre-competition anxiety, it may be beneficial to focus on the controllable aspects of performance—that is, to focus on what you need to do to perform well.

For example, a tennis player preparing for a quarterfinals match would focus on good footwork, playing aggressively and hitting deep into his opponent’s backhand, instead of focusing on reaching the semifinals. This player is more focused on controlling his or her own ability—moving well, being aggressive and hitting deep balls—than on who will win.

8 Ways to Get Player's Mentally Ready for Games

Stress is a direct result of an athlete or team focusing on, and trying to control the “uncontrollables” within their sport (i.e., officiating, play of opponents, playing conditions, crowd, etc.). When an athlete focuses on these uncontrollables, he/she is more likely to tighten up and “choke.” The following are specific guidelines to follow to help coaches train athletes to better manage competitive stress.

1. Coach the process, not the outcome.

When an athlete focuses on the importance of the game, winning and losing, or anything to do with the outcome of the performance, he/she is in big trouble. This focus distracts the athlete from a performance focus, tightens them up physically and insures that play will be tight and tentative. Get your athletes to focus on specifically what they have to do to win, not on winning.

2. Teach an awareness of the stress/performance curve. If you can help your athletes understand the relationship between their level of nervousness and how well they perform you will have taken a major step towards helping them to better handle pressure. If an athlete can “read” their nervousness pre-performance and can tell the difference between “good,” “bad,” and “not enough” nervous, then they will be in a better position to be able to do something about their arousal level before it’s too late.

3. Teach coping skills. Don’t waste your time yelling at your athletes to “relax.” This is not how to teach relaxation. Instead, spend a small amount of time pre-season providing your athletes with a number of mental skills that they can use to help them to better relax under pressure.

Not all members of your team will need these, but you’ll do far more good than not by investing a small amount of practice time offering two or three relaxation techniques (progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, breathing exercises, etc.) to everyone. Armed with ways of

cooling down, your athletes will be less likely to fall apart under stress.

4. Reframe adversity. Teach your athletes how to use whatever adversity comes their way to boost confidence rather than erode it. Teach reframing in practice. Help your players see that poor weather conditions, bad call by the officials, un-sportsmanlike play, fatigue, etc, can work for them. There is always an advantage in a disadvantage. Train your players to find it.

5. Use simulation daily. Practice does not make perfect, perfect practice makes perfect. It’s the quality of your practices that is ultimately responsible for how much your athletes get from practice time and how well they handle highly pressured situations.

Integrate competitive elements into your practices to help your athletes better adjust to the actual pressure of game day. The more your practices resemble competitions, the less chance your athletes will have of falling apart under pressure. If your athletes have trouble with bad calls, certain playing conditions, being down early, etc., simulate these elements as closely as possible in your practices.

6. Create a “go-for-it” atmosphere. In practice create an atmosphere of “nothing to lose” or “free to fail.” When athletes are not concerned about making mistakes they perform their best. If your players are worrying about messing up they will be distracted enough and tight enough to indeed mess up.

Encourage your players to let their mistakes go immediately and to focus on what they want to have happen, not what they are afraid will happen. Reward mistakes when an athlete has truly gone for it, when they have given a winning effort.

If you can teach your athletes to become oblivious to failure and mistakes, i.e., “I played well so therefore I am a winner.” “I was awful and therefore I’m a no good person.” You set the tone for this in how

you coach and interact with your athletes. Do not make this separation, then they will not be able to and their performance will suffer. If your ego is on the line every time you compete you have a lot to lose. When you play with a lot to lose, you will most likely get stressed out and play poorly.

7. Challenge your athletes, don’t threaten them. When an athlete or team is threatened with consequences should they not perform well, they will consistently fall apart when the game is on the line. Threats only serve to distract the athlete from the task at hand and get them to worry about the consequences for failure.

Focusing on the “what ifs” of losing is the last thing you want your athletes to do before and during an important game. Instead, challenge them. Give them the message, which is implicit in any challenge that you think that they can do it, that you believe in them. Athletes will most frequently rise to your challenges and respond poorly or inconsistently to your threats.

8. Focus your players for peak performance under pressure. Most stress-related performance problems are a direct result of faulty concentration. The athlete that gets easily psyched out or intimidated does so because he or she is focusing on the wrong things, (i.e., the actual or imagined prowess of the other player or team.)

Help your athletes concentrate on specifically what they have to do to play well. Teach them to “control their eyes and ears,” to only look at, or listen to things that keep them composed and performing the best.

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