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Psychological

Preparation of Athletes

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Psychological Preparation of Athletes

In fulfillment of

KIN 890: Independent Study

Michigan State University

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Introduction

“As a single footstep will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not make a pathway in the mind. To make a deep physical path, we walk again and again. To make a deep mental path, we must think over and over the kind of thoughts we wish to dominate our lives.” –Henry David Thoreau

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thletic competition requires a certain level of physical ability, coordination, and skill. At younger levels, athletes can often excel on their physical ability alone with little preparation. As athletes get older and the competition level increases, however, physical ability begins to even out and just “being good” is usually no longer sufficient to be successful. Athletes are forced to find ways to be better than other athletes with equal or better physical skills. While there are several methods to take athletic competition to the next level, one often overlooked approach is the psychological or mental preparation for competition. Psychological preparation helps athletes achieve optimal performance by focusing on and modifying the athletes’ own thoughts and perceptions.

This manual will focus on the sports of cross country and track and field, and will outline important aspects in the psychological preparation of athletes. This manual will also provide feedback from top track and field coaches on their use of psychological strategies to prepare athletes for competition, as well as provide strategies to address different psychological concerns associated with competition.

icon key

1. From the experts
2. From the literature
* Coaching strategies

The icon key to the left will be used throughout manual to support the information and strategies provided.

#

Chapter

1

 “What the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve.”

Preparing for Competition

 –Napoleon Hill

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he sport of track and field is notoriously known for being “mental.” Whether it’s running the endless laps of the 10,000 meter run or staring down the runway in the long jump, track and field athletes often have to battle their own thoughts just as much as battling other competitors. This chapter examines how thought and performance are connected and the importance of mental preparation. The chapter will also provide real-life strategies to prepare athletes for competition.

# The Importance of Mental Preparation

Psychologists have long identified the link between our thoughts and our actual behaviors. From the placebo effect to psychosomatic conditions and the power of meditation, what we think is often what we become. Athletic competition seems to be no exception. The importance of the psychological aspects of competition begins before the gun goes off with the athlete’s level of arousal. Psychologists and coaches previously believed that performance improved as arousal increased, called the “drive theory” (Huber, 2013). Psychologists have since shown that a medium level of arousal is best for high performance, referred to as the inverted U theory (see Figure 1-1).

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**Figure 1-1**

Arousal-performance chart: The inverted U theory states that performance is best at a medium level of arousal, with performance suffering when arousal is too high or too low.

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Psychologists have found that people perform better at fine motor skills with a lower level of arousal and perform better at large motor skills with a higher level of arousal. Furthermore, performance in newer skills suffers at high levels of arousal, while high levels of arousal can be managed for well-practiced skills (Huber, 2013).

The inverted U theory is not a perfect explanation of performance, however. Each athlete has his or her own ideal arousal level for successful performance. Thus, one athlete might perform well in a cross country race with a relatively low arousal level, while another athlete might perform well with a relatively high arousal level. Coaches need to help athletes find their ideal level of arousal to optimize performance.

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**Helping athletes’ find their ideal level of arousal:**

* Have athletes reflect on successful performances to identify what their level of arousal was prior to competition
* Help athletes master relaxation exercises to lower arousal levels prior to competition when necessary
* Help athletes utilize visualization exercise to increase arousal levels prior to competition when necessary

*Appendix A outlines relaxation and visualization exercises to manage arousal levels.*

Arousal levels are not the only psychological aspect that affects competition before it begins. Self-efficacy also appears to play a significant role. Athletes that have a low level of self-efficacy are not confident with their abilities to succeed, tend to shy away from challenges, and typically underperform. Athletes with a high level of self-efficacy do the opposite. They believe in their abilities and are motivated to meet challenges, as they are confident in their ability to perform.

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Bandura defined self-efficacy as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (as cited in Huber, 2013, p.31).

The athlete that does not believe he or she is capable of a certain performance, like becoming a conference champion, will most likely not succeed in that performance. A lack of self-efficacy can lead to increased stress or arousal level, loss of enjoyment, and negative thinking, all of which can individually hinder performance. Luckily, self-efficacy can be changed. Coaches need strategies that specifically address athletes’ self-efficacy and that can actively engage athletes to increase self-efficacy beliefs.

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Huber (2013) recommends changing self-efficacy through a process called compartmentalization, where one places “certain beliefs and attitudes into different or special compartments” (p. 29). One example may be an athlete that had a poor performance during the season but continually focuses on this performance despite other better performances. To help the athlete compartmentalize these thoughts and reduce negative thinking, the coach can help the athlete look at the big picture and remind him or her that the poor performance was much different from his or her usual ability. The coach can also point out any abnormalities that could have impacted performance, such as “training through” an intense segment of training, overtraining, lack of sleep, stress in school, or another temporary variable at that part of the season that has been or can be fixed.

Bandura identified four experiences that influence self-efficacy development: enactive (actual) experiences, vicarious (secondhand) experiences, persuasory (persuasion) experiences, and emotive (arousal or emotional states) experiences (as cited in Huber 2013). Coaches should try to create positive experiences for athletes for all four types, especially those who have a low self-efficacy. Below is a list of ways coaches can help athletes build self-efficacy. The list is not exhaustive and coaches should continually find new ways to help athletes increase self-efficacy. It is also important that coaches understand their athletes, as each athlete might respond differently to various approaches. For example, one athlete may become embarrassed if his or her accomplishments are acknowledged in front of others, thus the coach would need to be aware of this and support the athlete privately rather than in front of the team.

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**Ways to build self-efficacy:**

* Remind athletes of successful past experiences
* Have athletes envision themselves succeeding
* Support athletes with words of encouragement that relay the coach’s belief in the athletes’ abilities
* Create a positive team environment
* Encourage each athlete to focus on his or her own training, goals, and performances, rather to comparing his or herself to other athletes

# How Physical Performance and Mental Preparation Connect

Thinking seems relatively harmless when it is considered next to actual performance. However, researchers have found that thinking is more powerful, and more directly related to action, than previously believed. Thinking about a behavior activates the cortex of the brain as well as the neurological pathways from the brain to the muscles. In fact, mental rehearsal of a behavior creates very subtle muscular contractions associated with that behavior. While these muscular contractions are not strong enough to create actual movement, they do help create “muscle memory” (Huber, 2013).

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Leah O’Connor of Michigan State University finished in fifth place in the steeplechase at the 2013 Outdoor Track National Championship. “After that final, I told her that she needs to envision herself winning the race next year. She needed to see herself doing a victory lap and holding the flower bouquet” (Drenth, 2013). Leah came back in 2014 and was the national champion in the steeplechase. In her post-victory interview, Leah reflected on the benefit visualization gave her.

Visualization is one way athletes can harness the power of thinking. Visualization is a mental walk-through of a certain activity. For the cross country or track athlete, this can be best achieved through race visualization.

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**Helping athletes create their own race visualizations:**

* For cross country, walk athletes through the course, including challenging hills, turns, or other aspects of concern
* Have athletes write out a race plan that outlines what they feel they need to focus on or execute during the race
* In a quiet environment, have athletes close their eyes and envision executing the race plan they wrote out on the specific course discussed
* Have athletes start their visualization with arriving at the course and warming up, and continue their visualization through crossing the finish line
* Encourage athletes to visualize success, as well as overcoming unexpected circumstances during the race, such as poor race positioning or bad weather

Athletes who adequately prepare, both physically and mentally, achieve what is called being “in the zone” during competition. This zone is also known as flow, or “a conceptual representation of a seemingly effortless and intrinsically joyful activity in which an individual engages for no external reward or expectation of future benefit but simply because the activity itself is found rewarding” (Huber, 2013, p.49). As a coach, helping athletes achieve flow is the ultimate goal of mental preparation.

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Huber (2013) identified several aspects that help facilitate flow, many of which have already been discussed. Below is a list of areas coaches can focus on to get their athletes “in the zone.”

* Having the optimal level of arousal prior to competition
* Being motivated to perform
* Having a plan for competition
* Being focused and physically ready to perform
* Having confidence and a positive mental attitude
* Having optimal conditions for performance
* Being able to overcome challenges during competition
* Having positive relationships and cohesion with coaches and teammates

While psychological preparation seems like a solo activity, athletes rarely achieve peak performance alone. A successful athlete relies on a lot of other people. Having a coaching staff, athletic training staff, team doctor, sports psychologist, team nutritionist, strength coach, family members, and teammates that want the athlete to succeed is crucial. Coaches need to create environments that are supportive for the athletes.

Chapter

2

# *“When dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but creatures of emotion.” –Dale Carnegie*

Coaching Difficult Athletes

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o be successful, coaches need to find ways to get the best out of all of their athletes. Some athletes are easy to coach; they come to practice ready to work hard, listen to instructions, and buy into the philosophy with little to no convincing needed. Other athletes, however, are more difficult to work with; they may question the coaching philosophy, be limited by self-doubt, or cause team turmoil that negatively affects other athletes. This chapter explores strategies for working with three types of difficult athletes to overcome challenges and ultimately help these athletes succeed.

# The Self-Doubting Athlete

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Sara Kroll of Michigan State University was the 2012 Big Ten Cross Country Champion. “After winning the individual cross country title, she viewed every race she did not win as a failure” (Drenth, 2013). Inherently, this mindset has caused Kroll to consistently underperform since her championship.

The self-doubting athlete is constantly riddled by negative thoughts that limit the athlete’s performance. “I am just not good at any race over 800 meters.” “I will never finish in the top ten.” “I will never run faster than I did that race.” The self-doubting athlete may suffer from low confidence or a poor self-concept, or may fear success. Whatever the reason, the coach needs to find ways to help change the athlete’s thoughts to be more productive and helpful.

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Athletes who fear success suffer from a concept known as Jonah complex. Jonah complex is when “athletes fear their greatness and avoid personal growth and fulfillment of their talents” (Huber, 2013, p. 48). This concept can be captured in the Chinese proverb: “When an archer is shooting for enjoyment, he has all his skills; when he shoots for a brass buckle, he gets nervous; when he shoots for a prize of gold, he begins to see tow targets” (Elliot, 2008).

Self-doubting thoughts tend to be irrational, but the self-doubting athlete holds tight to these thoughts and views them as absolute truth. Coaches can utilize principles from rational-emotive therapy to help athletes identify and overcome shortcomings in their thinking. Below are three examples of irrational thoughts the self-doubting athlete may have with each thought’s shortcomings:

* *Irrational thought:* I need to succeed in each race to be a good runner.

*Shortcoming:* No athlete is successful in every race. Failure is necessary to learn and become a better runner.

* *Irrational thought:* Races cause too much pressure for me to be successful.

*Shortcoming:* Races do not cause pressure; thinking about the race causes pressure. Visualization and practice can help create more positive thinking about races, which will lead to less pressure at race time.

* *Irrational thought:* I must perform well for my coaches or teammates to like me.

*Shortcoming:* Race performance is not an indicator for positive personal relationships. In addition, everyone has a different standard of success and it is important that each person work toward their own personal standard.

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Irrational thinking may stem from an external locus of control or from a poor self-concept. Locus of control is “a person’s consistent tendency to attribute behavioral outcomes to specific causes over which the person either does or does not have control” (Huber, 2013, p. 66). Self-concept is an individual’s “notion of self from experiences with the environment” (Huber, 2013, p. 261).

In addition to helping athletes identify the shortcomings in irrational thinking, coaches can also help athletes change the cause of their irrational thinking, whether it is an external locus of control or a poor self-concept. To address locus of control, coaches can pull on concepts from attribution theory to increase motivation. To address self-concept, coaches can utilize person-centered therapy principles and Rogerian humanistic theory. Outlined below are strategies from each of these theories.

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**Helping athletes change their locus of control:**

* Write down attributions or causes that lead to successful or unsuccessful outcomes for the athlete

 *Example: Coach notices athlete is not working hard in practice*

* After each outcome, discuss with the athlete the causes or attributions that could have led to improved success

 *Example: After a poor performance, athlete believes he is not talented but coach helps athlete identify the connection between effort in practice and performance in competition*

* Help the athlete form logical attributions for each outcome

 *Example: Coach points out another athlete that works hard and succeeds, and another athlete who tends to slack off and is not successful; athlete begins to attribute poor performance to effort*

* Help the athlete develop a sense of hopefulness through positive thinking, goal setting, mastery learning, and focus on effort rather than outcome

 *Example: Coach works with athlete to set goal to work harder in practice and to use self-talk to remind self that if he works harder in practice, he will be more successful*

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**Helping athletes improve their self-concept:**

* Communicate and maintain positive perceptions and expectations of athletes, both publicly and privately
* Use mastery learning by breaking down skills into smaller, more manageable steps and ensuring each athlete masters the skill before moving to the next skill
* Be honest and open with communication to athletes, and give athletes the opportunity to be heard

Other simple actions can be taken to help the self-doubting athletes. Below are strategies coaches noted during interviews.

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Drenth stated that coaches need to help self-doubting athletes focus on the process, not the outcome, by “having athletes look at competition as a learning opportunity.” Coaches can discuss with the athlete what he or she learned from the competition upon completion to further emphasize learning opportunities within each effort. Smith Gilbert recommended showing self-doubting athletes objective information, such as improved performances in workouts. Being objective can help eliminate irrational thinking.

# The Know-It-All Athlete

The know-it-all athlete believes he or she knows best. Whether it is questioning the training, contesting the race plan, or just flat out not listening, the know-it-all athlete creates challenges that extend beyond individual performance and can negatively affect the team culture. Coaches need to act swiftly and firmly to avoid snowballing consequences.

An initial step in coaching the know-it-all athlete is listening and understanding where the athlete is coming from. Resistance can stem from a lack of trust between the athlete and coach. Thus, establishing an open and trusting relationship is sometimes a sufficient step in and of itself.

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Miller stated, “I have to listen to the athlete and be patient. If I learn about how they were raised, what their coaching was like in high school, and so on, I will be able to gain their trust. It takes time and takes the athlete coming to you, not you seeking out those conversations. Once you have their trust, you will begin to see them change and listen to you more often.”

The coach can also utilize principles of classical and operant conditioning to help the athlete learn appropriate behavior by modifying the response the coach has to various actions. Classical conditioning is a learning process by which a previously neutral stimulus elicits a response originally elicited only by another stimulus. Figure 2-1 outlines what classical conditioning might look like during a track and field practice.

**Figure 2-1: Classical Conditioning**

An athlete leads through the first part of a workout that the coach did not want that particular athlete to lead

No response

Coach blows whistle

*(Neutral Stimulus)*

Before Conditioning

Athlete gets out of lead

*(Unconditioned Response)*

Coach yells for athlete to get out of lead

*(Unconditioned Stimulus)*

Coach blows whistle

During Conditioning

Athlete gets out of lead

*(Unconditioned Response)*

Coach yells for athlete to get out of lead

*(Unconditioned Stimulus)*

After Conditioning

Athlete gets out of lead

*(Conditioned Response)*

Coach blows whistle

*(Conditioned Stimulus)*

Operant conditioning is a learning process by which behavior is modified through reinforcement and consequences. Figure 2-2 outlines the various types of reinforcements and consequences a coach can use to modify an athlete’s behavior. It is important, however, that a coach is aware of any unintended consequences operant conditioning may have. For example, if a coach implements a punishment of doing push-ups for being late to practice, the athlete may come to view all strength training as negative. Strength training is a key supplemental training tool for track athletes, thus the unintended consequences of the punishment might be that the athlete views the strength training as negative, stops or limits the amount of strength training he does, and does not reach his full athletic potential as a result. Coaches also want to be wary of using reinforcement too frequently because it can lose its effectiveness.

**Figure 2-2: Operant Conditioning**

Types, Definitions, and Examples

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Type | Definition | Example |
| Positive reinforcement | Add desired consequence for following correct behavior | Coach compliments the athlete for working hard in practice |
| Negative reinforcement | Remove undesired consequence for following correct behavior | Athlete does not have to pick up cones after practice for being positive during practice |
| Positive punishment | Add undesired consequence for following incorrect behavior | Coach glares at the athlete for speaking out during a team meeting |
| Negative punishment | Remove desired consequence for following incorrect behavior | Athlete is held out of a meet for consistently showing up late to practice |

Modifying the know-it-all athlete’s behavior is critical to avoid a wildfire spread of the behavior across the team through observational learning. Observational learning, explained through the principles of social cognitive theory, is a learning process by which behavior is learned through observing others. For example, if an athlete is consistently late to practice, does not follow the coach’s instructions, and talks back to the coach frequently, and the coach does nothing about the behavior, other athletes might start to act in the same manner. Imitation of behavior may be magnified if the athlete is a star athlete or team captain. On the other hand, if the coach responds to such behavior by kicking the athlete out of practice or off the team, other athletes will learn that the behavior is not tolerated or acceptable, and may modify their own behavior accordingly.

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