

In this issue...



Getting “In” with Sports Psychology includes information on:

- Individual Consultations
- Team Consultations
- Organizational Consultations
- Developing student-athlete life skills through athletic participation

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
Center for Sport Psychology and
Performance Excellence
P.O. Box 311280
Denton, TX 76203

Please Contact us at
<http://www.sportpsych.unt.edu>
or by phone at
(940) 369-SPORT
if you have questions.



UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

UNT Center for Sport Psychology Website can be
reached at: <http://www.sportpsych.unt.edu>

Performance Excellence

Volume 9, Issue 1

CENTER FOR SPORT PSYCHOLOGY NEWSLETTER

Fall 2006

Getting “IN” with Sports Psychology: Gaining a Mental Edge in High School Athletics

By Harlan Austin, M.A.
& Glenn Pfenniger, B.S.

Coaches, have you ever had a parent who was too involved in your game-planning or had an athlete that you knew had all the physical tools to be an outstanding player but just didn't quite have the mental toughness to make it? Athletic directors, have you ever had coaches who could not work together effectively or had problems yourself communicating with a coach? These are examples of some of the situations that coaches and athletic directors face every day in high school athletic programs. What they have in common is that they don't have anything to do with an athlete's or team's physical talents, but instead concern the “psychological” side of sport.

Fifteen years ago physical conditioning regimens that emphasized strength, speed, and stamina became the newest “IN” thing in training high school athletes and teams. Now that almost all high school athletes (and even younger) are involved in such training and have become bigger, faster, and stronger, coaches are looking for the next “IN” thing in training that will help take their athletes to the next level and make their teams perform their best. Well, the next “IN” approach is here and the focus is on making athletes smarter and mentally tougher through sport psychology training. The potency of sport psychology training has been proven over the decades

through its use with Olympians, professionals and college athletes. Coaches at these levels understand that sport psychology, like strength and conditioning, is an integral part of the overall training regimens for their athletes and teams. It is part of a recipe for performance success.

Athletes and teams employ sport psychology to improve performances by increasing confidence, concentration, cohesion, consistency, and communication, that is, by helping them be mentally tougher competitors. But sport psychologists also help athletes perform better by helping them cope with personal issues, such as relationship problems, stress, and depression, that affect everyone, even high level performers. In this article, we discuss the different ways in which a sport psychologist can consult with individual athletes, work specifically with one team and coaching staff, and work through an athletic department. What avenue fits for you?

Individual Consultations

So, what exactly happens during an individual sport psychology consultation? Consultations with athletes often consist of four to eight one hour sessions held on a weekly, or every other week, basis. During the first session, the consultant talks with the athlete about the problems he/she may be experiencing on or off the

playing field, determines his/her strengths, and assesses how the athlete is doing overall by gathering information about sport history, job/school, relationships, etc. Some of the common difficulties athletes experience are performance anxiety, inconsistency, sport-confidence deficiencies, not playing at their potential, difficulty focusing, and burnout. Once the problem has been defined, the consultant and athlete set goals for the specific changes they want to achieve in athletic performances and/or life. Goal setting is an important aspect of the consultation and of sport in general because it provides markers against which to monitor and evaluate progress; goals also serve as a motivator and can help athletes focus on what needs to be done each day to be successful. Once the goal is set, the consultant and athlete develop a game plan for exactly how they will reach the goal. These game plans generally involve cognitive and behavioral strategies, such as relaxation techniques, attentional focusing, or positive thinking, and often are implemented within the athlete's practices or in the competitive venue. The key, just as it is for mastering a physical skill, is practice. Once athletes are taught the strategies for improving, they must practice them just as they would their jump shot, route running, or swing.

(Continued on page 2)



Getting "IN" with Sports Psychology (cont'd)

When we work with an individual athlete, we generally involve other individuals who would have information about the athlete's performance or who would be able to help the athlete implement the new mental toughness strategies he/she is learning. For example, we often consult with the athlete's coaches because they see the athlete most every day in practices and/or games, have objective information about the athlete's performances, and can often work with the athlete on whatever problem is going on during practice and games with a little interaction from the consultant. For athletes under the age of 18 in particular, parents also play an important role, providing information about the athletes and monitoring their progress at home. In other instances, athletic trainers work with sport psychology consultants to assist athletes in coping more successfully with injury and rehabilitation. Areas on which they might focus include adjusting to not playing, decreases in motivation, goal setting, and healing imagery. In addition, consultants may attend practices and competitions to observe athletes, teams, and coaches in action. This involvement can provide the consultant with valuable information about specific issues that may only arise in practice or during competitions. A consultant can then provide feedback and even video consultation based on their observations.

Team Consultations

Although some concerns are best dealt with individually, sometimes the performance problems are shared by the team and thus effect the entire unit's performance. Thus, many sport psychologists choose to intervene at the team level to improve performance and help the group work more

effectively together. But, how do sport psychologists work with teams? Often the first step is to introduce sport psychology as a concept to the team. Various topics, such as goal setting, attentional control, pre-performance routines, or arousal regulation, may be part of this introduction if specific skills are lacking on the team. Once this introduction has been done, the consultant will often observe practices and/or competitions to learn how the team works together and what potential mental obstacles interfere with their success. Some sport psychologists employ assessment tools to gather information about a team's strengths and weaknesses while also introducing the athletes to a vocabulary of mental skills. Once a team's strengths and weaknesses have been identified, the sport psychology consultant generally will meet with the team to discuss what they have observed and to provide suggestions for how the team can improve their performances through mental toughness training. Team workshops are one approach a sport psychologist may take to teach specific mental toughness strategies.



Another strategy used by sport psychologists working with teams focuses more on interactions and/or teamwork, such as on issues like communication, identifying "roles" on a team, conflict resolution, and building team cohesion. Often sport psychology consultants will facilitate team-building activities that focus on a specific area, like improving communication or building trust. By participating in such activities, athletes can learn better, more productive ways to work together and be a more cohesive unit. The ultimate goal is to help that team improve its performance and achieve the goals they have set; and if they have yet to set any goals, the consultant can help them with that too. Sport psychology consultants also can work with coaches to help them better understand their teams and become more effective in how they work with them. This work can range from helping coaches become better communicators to helping them become more effective motivators. Through collaboration with the coaching staff a sport psychology consultant can help a team work towards its goals of peak performance.

Organizational Consultations

An even broader approach that a sport psychology consultant can take is working not only with athletes, parents, and coaches, but also administrators to help develop an overall philosophy and mission statement for the athletic department. Developing an athletic department philosophy should focus on the foundational beliefs that the administration and coaches have for the direction of the department. The mission statement should outline the specific beliefs/goals of the athletic department, and can serve as a motivational tool and strategic map for everyone to follow. Ultimately, the

day-to-day actions of an athletic department should be guided by the department's philosophy and mission statement. Here is an example of one mission within an athletic department's overall statement that was formulated by a group of coaches, athletic directors, and a sport psychology consultant:

Mission: Developing student-athlete life-skills through participation in athletics.

Goal 1:
Developing Character

Goal 2:
Developing Work Ethic

Goal 3:
Developing Sport-specific skills through practice instruction, & competition

Goal 4:
Developing mentally tough athletes

Goal 5:
Developing and maintaining the health and wellness of the student athletes

Once a mission or philosophy has been identified, it is important for coaches to identify ways that they can integrate that mission into their daily practices, training, planning, and interactions with their players. Consistency across teams and coaches is important as the mission is implemented department wide because coaches have the most opportunities to reinforce the mission on a daily basis. The mission also can provide a direction for off-season training programs, interactions with

parents, fundraising...etc. For example, if developing mental-toughness in the athletes is a mission of the athletic department, then coaches could work closely with a



sport psychology consultant to develop the training programs that can lead to that outcome. As each coach works to achieve the overall mission of the department, he/she will need to send consistent messages that are reinforced during training, at practice, and during competitions. Through encouragement, self-monitoring, and feedback the administration and coaches can eventually shape the climate of the athletic department by making the mission statement a reality. Working with a sport psychology consultant can assist athletic directors and coaches in establishing a clear set of expectations and goals that their athletic department works towards. The process of developing and integrating an athletic department philosophy is long-term, so having a road map to success is essential.

Conclusion

With the growth and acceptance of sport psychology at the college, professional, and elite/Olympic levels, mental toughness training is the new "IN" at the high school level. High school sports are becoming more competitive and high school athletes are beginning to specialize in sports more so than they did 10 or 20 years ago. Working with a sport psychologist can have a tremendous impact on the success of individual athletes, teams, and athletic departments as a whole. Although we presented each facet of a sport psychology consultation separately, athletic organizations can select the mix of services they believe are needed to get the best out of their athletes and teams on and off the field. Sport psychologists can be most effective when, just like strength and conditioning coaches and athletic trainers, they are part of the athletic department and viewed as another coach who is there to help the athletes perform at their best. In this approach, the sport psychology consultant is embedded within the system and comes to know the coaches, parents, and athletes so they can trust the consultant and benefit from what he/she has to offer.

