

Vol 2, Issue 24: From Practice to Competition

From Practice to Competition

In our work with coaches and teams we are often asked how we can help to solve various problems. One common problem that coaches have identified is the athlete who performs well during practice, but poorly during competition. Here are a few pointers that may assist in identifying and possibly fixing this common problem:

Measure Practice & Performance: One way we can examine the differences between performance at practice and performance during competition is to identify what you are measuring. Practice drills should be goal-directed, similarly to how game-play is goal directed. This approach will allow specific performance behaviors, such as free throws made or percentage of first serves in, to be measured both in practice and during competition, in turn, allowing you to see exactly how an athlete performs in each situation. If there is a quantifiable difference discovered, you can then explore what specifically is occurring during a game (physically, cognitively, and emotionally) that leads to poor execution. Upon identifying any problems, you can focus training in practice to address that area. This will help you create competition-like situations in practice for which the athlete can mentally train.

Practice Like It's Real: In order to assist athletes to perform like they practice, they must first learn to practice like you want them to perform. Conducting practice in a manner that mimics real-game situations allows athletes to not only practice physical skills needed to perform, but also the mental skills that are used during a competition. When an athlete does not shoot well in a game (but does so during practice) they don't actually "lose" the ability to shoot—instead they are most likely taking a different mental approach during games than they do during practice or are being overwhelmed by competitive pressures because they have not learned how to effectively work with those in practices. If you can make practice feel like a game, athletes are then given the opportunity to practice using the mental skills they need in a game.

Get Your Mind Right: Pre-performance routines help ensure that athletes are in a positive and focused frame of mind for the start of their event/competition. Like any other physical skill, though, these routines need to be practiced if they are going to be used successfully in competition. This fits in well with the above mentioned strategies—if practice is set up like a real-competition, the athletes will be forced to continually go through the steps of preparing themselves for competition. The more they practice their routine, the more it becomes habit, and the easier it is to be mentally ready to perform.

At the Center for Sport Psychology and Performance Excellence at the University of North Texas, we have a dedicated staff of sport consultants who can help athletes, teams, and coaches learn to practice and perform more consistently. For more information please call us at 940-369-7767 or visit our website at www.sportpsych.unt.edu or email us at sportpsych@unt.edu. As always, we leave you with our sport quote of the week:

"Do the thing, and you will have the power" -Ralph Waldo Emerson