

***Psychological Preparation Programs:
Theory, concepts and applications***

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Introduction

In the frame of the modern sports, athletes as well as coaches, recognize the importance of sport scientists for the improvement of athletes' performance. Based on this, sport psychology is an important topic in sports. More specifically, many coaches, athletes and sport scientists have mentioned the importance of psychological characteristic for helping athletes to learn new skills, for the increase and high levels of athletes' performance.

Sport psychology examines behavior in exercise and sport domain.

Sport psychology concretely, attends not only athletes, and their coaches, but also has application in athletes' parents, referees, Physical Educators, while in the same time a sport psychologist cooperates with physiotherapists and dieticians. However, psychological preparation has wrongly been connected only with a "problem" of athlete's performance, during competition, training or in everyday life. Many people believe that psychological skills are rather stable and difficult to change or in other cases they don't know exactly what sport psychology can do. In addition, coaches and athletes seek for sport psychologist's help, when they face a problem, believing that he will be able to provide them "fast" and "easy" if not magical solutions.

Based on aforementioned perceptions and views mostly as a result of personal experience and athletes' and coaches' aspects, it is advisable to comment the following:

(1) During training and competitions, there is continuous athletes' reference or appeal of psychological factors which are not clearly or totally understood concerning their affect on behavior and performance.

(2) Psychological skills should be developed co instantaneously with physical skills, otherwise there will be "inequality", which can become source of "problems" in older sport ages. Very often an athlete cannot emotionally "handle" what he/she can biologically achieve.

(3) The lack of providing effective and adaptive methods/techniques during developmental ages for problem solving, makes more difficult the promotion and/or change of this methods in older ages, and

(4) The athlete is able through psychological preparation programs to improve his/her emotional characteristics and, specifically, those parameters that will contribute for his/her peak performance.

It's widely accepted that coaches as well as athletes "work" psychologically during their preparation. However, sometimes, they miss or they do not have a systematic planning and evaluation of the psychological preparation program, in relation to the training program.

Sport psychologist's role

Sport psychologist applies in athletes a variety of techniques and strategies in order to facilitate and maximize athlete's performance. In addition, sport psychologist cooperates with athlete's coach to enhance the effect of these techniques and strategies, and also for creating a beneficial, positive and effectual "environment" during training and competitions.

The basic subject of sport psychologist includes the evaluation of athlete's emotional state, familiarization with various psychological skills and subsequently their evaluation and influence in sport performance. However, besides the importance of the aforementioned actions, the role of sport psychologist is not unequivocal and inflexible. On the contrary, sport psychologist's role is compound, adaptable, and responsible to coaches' and athletes' requirements and demands. Sport psychologist takes on the role of the accommodator, the educator, the mediator, the consultant, or the friend. This role is more difficult but is more flexible and effective, responding to the demands of high levels performance and sports.

Conclusively, sport psychologist's "work" can be allocated in three dimensions- directions:

(A) Cooperation with the athlete. In the beginning, sport psychologist records athlete's psychological characteristics during training sessions and competitions, and selects also critical characteristics, and teaches him/her breathing control, relaxation techniques, and mental training. Cooperation also aims at resolving stress stimulus, practicing in focusing, confidence development, improvement of emotional state, cognitive reconstruction, intrinsic motivation and finally at athlete's psychological preparation in order to face sport's demands.

(B) Cooperation with the trainer/coach. Sport psychologist informs coach about athlete's psychological characteristics, as well as the use and integration of the psychodiagnostic results. Coach/trainer discusses with sport psychologist the problems that (s)he faces in training and competitions. In addition, cooperation between sport psychologist and coach can deal with special problems, like injuries, commitment to rehabilitation program, relationships with other athletes, temporary back down tendencies etc.

(C) Cooperation with the parents. Sport psychologist is orientated in facing general problems relating to child's behavior outside sport process, like school, athlete's special interests or hobbies etc.

From the above, it becomes clear that the role of the trainer is multidimensional and modulated to the specific needs of the young athlete. This role should give answers to the compound needs in order to respond to the high demands of the modern competitive sports.

Psychological Preparation Programs

The nature of Psychological Preparation Program (PPP) consists in offering psychological services to the athlete-individual, resolving not only the problems related with his/her preparation and sport performance, but also athlete's problems in everyday life. The program targets in practicing athlete to psychic and mental skills in order to face negative emotions, such as anxiety, etc, increasing self confidence, resolving learning problems, developing athlete's intrinsic motivation, self-awareness and control, setting goals, improving interpersonal relations and communication, etc.

Structure - Characteristics of Psychological Preparation Programs

The structure and the characteristics of the Psychological Preparation Program are presented below.

Periods - phases. The Psychological Preparation Program is composed of three psychological preparation phases which are the followings:

(a) Basic Psychological Preparation: It is the first period of the Psychological Preparation Program. The content of this period is mainly targeted on athlete's training regarding psychological skills and techniques, such as concentration, progressive muscle relaxation, mental relaxation, imagery rehearsal, dissociation, and detachment training.

(b) General Competitive Psychological Preparation: The general competitive psychological preparation corresponds to the competitive period of the sport. The duration of this phase is analogous to the sport and the program of athlete's competition. This phase includes the application and practice of learned psychological skills in training and competition, such as mental training, problem solving, motivation, goal setting, self-confidence, attitude in training and competitions etc.

(c) Specific Competitive Psychological Preparation: This period refers to the preparation for a specific competition, aiming at the athlete's achievement of optimal psychological situation. The athlete practices

Psychological skills before the competition, during and after competition.

Some of the techniques which athletes learn during the Psychological Preparation Program are the followings:

Mental training. The content of training consists of technical elements, stress management, thought stopping, and self-confidence improvement. The athlete visualizes situations in training and competition (e.g., mental rehearsal of a technically sound skill execution using video or pictures, modeling a confident performance, imagining success, recalling past successful performances and internalizing positive feelings).

Relaxation technique. The relaxation technique is a combination of progressive muscle relaxation and breathing control.

Goal setting. Goal plans and achievement goal orientation (ego orientation, task orientation, win etc.)

Cognitive restructuring. Cognitive restructuring includes changes from negative thinking to positive thinking, using self-talk etc.

Meetings. Each meeting has specific content which is determined mainly by the period of Psychological Preparation Program. However, the content of PPP can change in order to serve things, such as (a) what the coach or the athlete wants to be practiced and (b) what sport psychologist has pointed out. The frequency of the meetings is one per week.

Daily individual application. In the frames of Psychological Preparation Program the athlete should make daily practice in the psychological skills that have learned. The daily practice constitutes a necessary condition for learning and automation of psychological skills. The duration of practice is from 10 to 20 minutes approximately, taking place initially in the house. However, the athlete should learn to practice psychological skills before, during or after training, in order to use them during his/her competition.

Psychodiagnosis. Basic element of Psychological Preparation Program constitutes the process of psycho-diagnosis. The purpose of psycho-diagnosis is to provide information regarding athlete's psychological and emotional characteristics (general, and/or specific). The psycho-diagnosis includes emotional measurements (e.g., self-confidence, stress, worry, goal setting, coping, concentration etc) and psycho-kinetic (e.g., perception, attention, reaction time).

Athlete's psychological assessment comprises of the following measures: (a) General measures (profile of mood state, general trait anxiety, general self-esteem, social desirability etc.), and (b) Competitive measures (competitive trait anxiety, competitive trait self-confidence, goal orientation, competitive worries, ways of coping, concentration etc.)

Duration. A short-term Psychological Preparation Program can last for about 10 to 12 months (psychological support for an important competition or for a specific period of training and competitions). However, a more effective Psychological Preparation Program does not have a time limit and the cooperation between sport psychologist, athlete and coach lasts longer than one period (1 - 4 years).

Psychological skills and the psychological techniques that will be used during the psychological preparation program

<i>PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS</i>	<i>PSYCHOLOGICAL TECHNIQUES</i>
Relaxation	Progressive muscle relaxation
Concentration	Progressive muscle relaxation Breathing control
Mental training	Internal mental training External mental training
Arousal, activation	"Key" words-pictures Music Self-talk Mental training
Programming and setting of athlete's goals	Main goals, daily goals, training goals, season goals etc.
Self-confidence - Self-efficacy	Mental recall of athlete best performance, high level of achievement etc.
Thought management/Positive self-concept Self-awareness Problem solving Decision making	Self-talk Change of negative thoughts Diary of thoughts - emotions Information collection (cognitive appraisal, energetic coping) Criteria of athlete's decision Alternative solution etc.