

Mental Skills Training

INTRODUCTION

Sport psychology is the study of thinking in sport and how that thinking affects an individual's behaviour and performance in training and competition. Sport psychology focuses on teaching practical skills to athletes to enable them to develop their mental abilities to the same level as their physical abilities.

Through developing a mental skills training programme, most of your gymnasts will be able to improve their psychological game and hence their overall sports performance. The focus at this level is on goal setting as a tool to enhance gymnast motivation and performance.

On completion of this module you will be better able to:

- **UNDERSTAND THE ROLE OF MENTAL SKILLS' TRAINING IN DEVELOPING SPORTS PERFORMANCE**
- **UNDERSTAND THE PRINCIPLES OF MOTIVATION**
- **DEVELOP GOAL-SETTING STRATEGIES WITH YOUR GYMNASTS TO ENHANCE MOTIVATION**



- **UNDERSTAND THE ROLE OF MENTAL SKILLS' TRAINING IN DEVELOPING SPORTS PERFORMANCE**

Physical skills, physical fitness and mental skills are the building blocks of the complete athlete that produce outstanding sports performances. At the top level of sport, where many athletes have equal physical ability, the difference between a great performance and a good performance or between winning and losing is often related to mental rather than physical abilities.

Indeed, at any level of competition the psychological component can become the critical factor of success. There are many examples where a less (physically) skilled gymnast has succeeded over a more skilled opponent due to being more mentally prepared or 'psyched up' for the competition.

MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING

Mental skills' training involves a number of strategies and techniques gymnasts may use to improve their focus and concentration, and enhance their sports performance. They include such things as:

■ **Goal Setting**

Setting both short and long term goals gives the gymnast direction and enhances motivation. Deciding on a plan of action identifies the steps required in order to achieve those goals. (Goal setting is covered in more detail later in this module.)

■ **Imagery**

The mental rehearsal or practice of a skill or performance using your senses. Imagery allows the gymnast to practice the physical skills in the mind without having to perform them. Gymnasts can use imagery, for example, to visualise themselves succeeding in their next event or competition.

■ **Relaxation**

Techniques that help gymnasts relax their muscles and calm their nerves (take control) during both training and competition.

■ **Self-Talk**

The use of focus or mood words and positive self statements that focus the gymnast's attention on performance, create some emotion, or encourage the gymnast to maintain the effort and build confidence.

■ **Mental Plan**

Planned strategies or routines that help the gymnasts 'psych up' before and during competition, and cope with any mishaps or distractions that may occur. A gymnast's mental plan may incorporate one or all of the above mental skills' techniques



Sport psychology and mental skills' training have the most to contribute to improving sports performance in the future. Just like the physical and technical components of performance, the psychological component takes time to develop – there are no short

cuts. Sport psychology should be used to enhance sports performance by training the mental skills alongside the physical skills during your coaching sessions.

What are some of the Barriers to Gymnasts and Coaches Implementing Mental Skills in their Training Programmes?

1. The belief that psychological characteristics are inherited qualities that cannot be changed.
2. The belief that whatever is needed psychologically can be gained through experience in sport.
3. The perception that you should only use sport psychology when things are going wrong.
4. A lack of knowledge about how to develop these skills and integrate them into the training programme.

THE PRINCIPLES OF MOTIVATION

In sport it is likely that both the coach and athlete will be motivated by a variety of reasons. These reasons will change with age, experience, work and other commitments. However, if the athlete is not sufficiently motivated they will not train effectively or perform well in competitions. As a coach you should be aware that there are many different types of motivation:

- Participation motivation – why athletes choose to play a particular sport.
- Long-term motivation – commitment to training/practicing for your sport over an entire season or seasons.
- Short-term motivation – building up for a particular competition or event.
- Pre-game motivation – the ‘psych-up’ before the race or game.
- Extrinsic motivation – e.g. for rewards, recognition, trips away, money.
- Intrinsic motivation – e.g. for fun, health and fitness, making new friends.

Motivation is made up primarily of two components: direction and intensity of effort. Direction refers to where we choose to direct our energy. What are the gymnast’s reasons for choosing to participate in this particular sport? There are many other choices, for example the movies, socialising with friends, tramping or watching television. Intensity refers to how much effort is invested in the chosen direction. For example, two athletes may both be motivated to attend training, however one athlete has a very low intensity and is unenthusiastic at training where the other athlete who has a very high intensity will be making an all-out 100% effort throughout the session.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:

- Do you know what motivates the gymnasts you coach?
- How can you best meet their needs at training and competition, and consequently keep them involved in the sport?

HOW CAN COACHES HELP WITH THEIR ATHLETES’ MOTIVATION?

Coaches cannot control the motivation levels of their athletes, however it is important for coaches to be aware of why their athletes are involved in sport and what their needs may be.

Not all of the team members are involved for exactly the same reasons. It can be a useful exercise for the coach, at the beginning of each season, to get feedback from the gymnasts on what they want to achieve over the next few months. This exercise also reduces the chance of any conflicts or misunderstandings later on.

It is worth noting that all humans want to feel worthy. It is important for a gymnast to feel accepted as a valued member of the team. Many athletes equate winning with success and losing with failure. Therefore these athletes believe that to feel worthy they must win.

However, in any sporting situation 50% of the participants will win and 50% will lose. A coach who over-emphasises the importance of winning places unnecessary stress on the athletes who will struggle to stay motivated if the team is not winning.

New Zealand society also tends to emphasise the value of winning, e.g. the media give considerable coverage to sporting champions, and sometimes talk about the defeat of a national team (e.g. the All Blacks beaten by the Springboks) as a national disaster.

Coaches can help their gymnasts feel worthy by:

- helping them set realistic goals
- involving them in the decision-making
- recognising individual progress and improvement
- not over-emphasising winning
- providing opportunities, time and suitable coaching that help improve athlete performance.



GOAL-SETTING

“The purpose of goals is to focus our attention. The body, together with the mind, will not reach toward achievement until they have clear objectives. The magic begins when you set goals. It is then that the switch is turned on, the current begins to flow, and the power to accomplish becomes a reality.” (Wynn Davis, 1998)

All athletes involved in sport will have their own goals in their lives and these will include goals for sporting achievement. Having goals in sport can assist gymnasts in developing their mental skills such as motivation, self-confidence and arousal control, thus enhancing the gymnasts’ sports performance. However, in order to achieve, they must set the right goals. Many people set New Year’s resolutions, which are types of goals, but often these resolutions are broken within a week or even a day!

Goals help gymnasts to recognise their success and achievements more regularly and consequently increase their motivation to strive for and achieve their next goal.

GOAL-SETTING GUIDELINES

Goal setting requires communication and sometimes negotiation by everyone involved. In gymnastics this concerns primarily the coach, the athlete and the team as a whole, however it

may also require the cooperation of parents, spouses, friends, school, etc.

Goals should be defined, preferably in writing, before the start of the season. Organise a goal setting session where *all* team members are included and ensure everyone gets to have a say. Work towards a consensus; if the team does not agree with or believe in the goals there will be no 'ownership' and no desire to achieve them.

Consider the following factors in your goal-setting session:

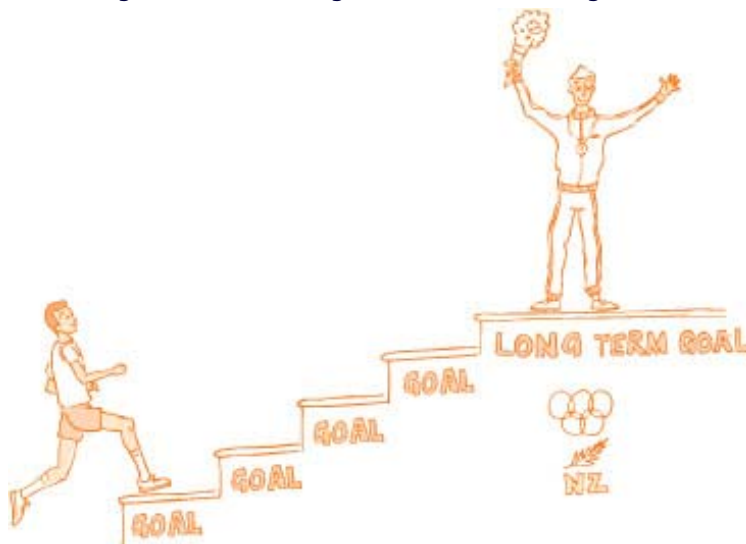
- What is the long-term goal?
- What is the gymnast's / team's potential?
- How committed are the gymnasts?
- How much opportunity is there for practice?



Set mental, physical and technical goals for both training and competition. These goals may be related to physical fitness, developing a skill, behaviour towards opponents and officials, attitude at training, nutritional goals, etc.

THE GOAL-SETTING STAIRCASE

The progression of goals helps your gymnasts to see the steps required to achieve their goals. If they achieve their training goals they will achieve their performance goals. If they achieve their performance goals they give themselves the opportunity to achieve their short-term and long-term outcome goals – their dream goal.



- **Dream Goal (long-term)**

What is the long-term goal? What is possible in the long term if all the limits are stretched?

- **Dream Goal (short-term)**

What is the dream goal this year? What is possible if the limits are stretched this year?

■ **Realistic Performance Goal (this year)**

What is a realistic performance goal that can be achieved this year (based on the present skill level, on the potential for improvement, and on current motivation)?

■ **Monthly Training Goal**

What is a personal goal that a gymnast (or team) can achieve by a specific date? Have the gymnast(s) write down one thing they would like to accomplish, or approach, with special focus or intensity.

■ **Next Training Goal**

Have the gymnast(s) set a personal goal that they feel they can achieve by the end of the next practice. Get them to write it down in their diaries.

(Adapted, by permission, from Terry Orlick, 1986, *Psyching for Sport: Mental Training for Athletes*. Champaign, IL, Leisure Press, 15-16.)

OUTCOME GOALS VERSUS PERFORMANCE GOALS

- Gymnasts during competition should be focused on their performances and specific team responsibilities. They should not be overly concerned about the outcome, as it will distract their focus.
- Gymnasts have more control over their performances within the competition than the actual outcome. Performance goals allow for success even if they lose, e.g. a tennis player can finish the match without winning – but feel pleased because they achieved 80% of first serves in.
- Outcome goals focus on winning or losing. However, the outcome of a sports competition does not always reflect the athlete's ability or improvement, as the outcome can be determined by luck, the officials, and especially by the other athletes. For example, an athlete may achieve a goal of beating an opponent in a cycle race, but if that opponent got a puncture or had the flu at the time, what is the value of that result?
- If athletes achieve their performance goals there is every chance (though no guarantee) that they will achieve their outcome goals.

" You forget about the outcome. You know you are doing the right things. So you relax and perform. After that you can't control anything anyway. It's out of your hands, so don't worry about it."

Michael Jordan, 1994.



SETTING 'SMART' GOALS

■ **Specific**

Goals need to be specific. A common error in goal setting is that the goal is too vague. An example of a specific goal is "I want to run the 1500m in 3.56s by 24 July" compared

with simply saying "I want to run the 1500m faster".

■ **Measurable**

If a goal is specific it should also be measurable and/or observable. Numerical goals are easier to measure (e.g. distance or time) than subjective goals (e.g. an improvement in attitude).

■ **Achievable**

Goals should be difficult enough to challenge yet realistic enough to achieve, if you are committed. Goals that are too high will lead to failure and decrease motivation, even if an athlete has performed well.

■ **Relevant**

Goals should be relevant to the gymnast's current ability and future potential. Consider the gymnast's opportunity for practice and level of commitment towards achieving their goals.

■ **Timeline**

Goals should have a timeframe or target date. Gymnasts should have long-term objectives to give them focus, but should set short-term goals to keep them motivated. (Source: Hersey, P. and Blanchard, K., *Management of Organisational Behaviour*. Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1988.)

Goals should be regularly reviewed and evaluated.

For example, target dates may need to be changed due to injury or illness, the selected goals may be too hard or too easy, or the strategies for achieving the goals may not be effective.

ASSIGNMENT REQUIREMENTS

1. Develop a set of long-term goals and outcome goals for you as coach, your athletes and/or your team. From these long-term and outcome goals develop a set of performance goals. Take this a step further and develop relevant training goals to achieve these performance goals.
2. Complete the goal setting worksheet on the next page for the gymsport and coaching community you are working with.

FURTHER READING

Hodge, K., *Sport Motivation; Training Your Mind for Peak Performance*. Reed Publishing (NZ) Ltd, Auckland, 1994.

Orlick T., *Psyching for Sport: Mental Training for Athletes*. Leisure Press, Champaign IL 61820, 1986.

GOAL-SETTING WORKSHEET

NAME:

DATE:

GYMSPORT:

Current Strengths:

Current Weaknesses:

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GOAL(S) FOR THIS SEASON:

GOAL	STRATEGIES	TARGET DATE	COMMENTS/EVALUATION
Physical training goals			
Mental training goals			
Technical training goals			