HEN an athlete sustains an injury and must go through the rehabilitation and treatment process, many factors play a role in how he or she will respond. These factors may include the athlete’s stress level, perceived social support, the facility where rehabilitation takes place, and the climate created in the rehabilitation setting. The athletic trainer or therapist (AT) creates the atmosphere for rehabilitation and potentially has the ability to generate a particular social-motivational environment to ensure a better outcome. If the AT can deliver information to the athlete and form reward and punishment systems tailored to the athlete’s own personality and goal orientation, he or she may be able to enhance the athlete’s motivation and program adherence. Belza et al.1 found that osteoarthritis patients who demonstrated better adherence to an aquatic exercise program had improved well-being and a more optimistic outlook. Duncan and Pozel2 reported similar findings with heart failure patients. Patients who were part of an adherence improvement intervention group had greater success in exercise performance and quality of life. Similar improvements in sport injury rehabilitation outcomes, such as lesser pain, greater function, and return to play, may result from improved adherence. The purpose of this report is to describe the motivational climate and present possible strategies for creating the most conducive rehabilitation setting for attaining optimal outcomes.

Motivational Climate

Motivational climate is the environment created by an influential individual through information delivery, provision of feedback, and a system of rewards and punishments.3 Two different types of the motivational climate have been identified: mastery and performance. A mastery motivational climate emphasizes learning, effort, and improvement and is measured through self-referenced success. A performance climate emphasizes performance outcomes and norm-referenced success.4 For example, in a climate that emphasizes mastery, an individual is rewarded or acknowledged for improvement on a previous performance or for demonstrating high persistence and effort at a difficult task. In contrast, in a climate that emphasizes performance, individuals are only recognized or rewarded if they out-perform an opponent or teammate or win an event. Effort, persistence, and self-improvement would not be acknowledged in this type of environment. The motivational climate plays an important role in changing one’s perceptions and actions within the setting.

Motivational climate research in the sport setting demonstrates that athletes’ perceptions, beliefs, and feelings about sport differ between mastery and performance motivational climates. In the sport setting, the coach is the figure who structures the sport environment and thus creates the motivational climate. Fry and Newton5 examined attitudes toward tennis, coach, and teammates in relation to the athletes’ perceptions of the motivational climate. Fry and Newton5 examined attitudes toward tennis, coach, and teammates in relation to the athletes’ perceptions of the motivational climate. As hypothesized, athletes who perceived the climate of tennis practice as higher in mastery indicated they liked their coach, enjoyed playing for him or her, and also wanted to have him or her as coach the following year; however, athletes with higher perceptions of a performance climate reported unsatisfactory feelings toward the
coach because of the competitive and rivalry nature of the setting.

Seifriz et al.6 studied the relationship between the perceived motivational climate of a basketball setting and intrinsic motivation, goal orientations, and goal structures. Athletes who saw the basketball environment as dominant in mastery had significantly higher levels of enjoyment as well as higher intrinsic motivation than athletes who viewed the climate as low in mastery. Also, greater perception of a performance climate was related to higher anxiety in relation to competition, negative consequences for mistakes, and lower perception of reinforcement. Treasure and Roberts7 found a related pattern in their assessment of how the perception of the motivational climate predicts athletes’ ideas about causes for success and sources of satisfaction. Athletes perceiving a high mastery climate attributed success to effort, whereas those with high perceptions of a performance climate believed ability and deception were involved in success. As perception of a mastery climate increased, so did the feeling that self-improvement was the reason for satisfaction; however, as performance climate perception increased, the source of satisfaction was more likely derived from normative success.

Research has indicated that motivational climate is influential in the sport setting. Does the motivational climate play a role in the rehabilitation setting? If athletes’ perceptions of the motivational climate in the rehabilitation setting are similar to the sport setting, a rehabilitation environment that places emphasis on putting forth effort, learning, and judging success from one’s self-improvement (i.e., mastery motivational climate) would increase the athletes’ perceptions of rehabilitation competence, motivation, and rehabilitation enjoyment level and decrease anxiety and distress. The opposite would be true for a rehabilitation climate characterized by norm-referenced success (i.e., performance motivational climate). ATs could inadvertently give more attention, time, and energy to highly skilled athletes (e.g., starters) as well as highlighting or more extrinsically rewarding their accomplishments during rehabilitation, thus creating an environment that gives unequal recognition and rewards based on ability (i.e., performance climate). A mastery motivational climate is oriented to produce a positive psychological response to injury (e.g., higher perceived competence, better coping skills) and optimal rehabilitation outcomes (e.g., lower pain, return to play, better function, etc.).

Practical Implications

Ames3 described six dimensions of a learning environment that can be structured to promote a mastery climate. The acronym TARGET represents the six dimensions: Task, Authority, Recognition, Grouping, Evaluation, and Time. Following are TARGET-based strategies for the AT to use for development of a mastery-focused motivational climate in the rehabilitation setting.

Task Dimension

The task dimension involves the design of rehabilitation activities and assignments to increase an athlete’s personal involvement in the rehabilitation process. Realistic short-term goals allow athletes to focus on the progress and to recognize that rehabilitation is within their control, such as “I will increase my range of motion today by 10 degrees.”8 The AT should incorporate a variety of activities that make rehabilitation fun and interesting, yet challenging. Patients should understand why each activity is important and how it will facilitate progress.9 The AT should also help patients develop time management and organizational skills. Athletes, especially those who are involved in other activities, or those with learning disabilities, need to develop strategies for organizing, planning, and monitoring their own rehabilitation.10 Understanding of the injury rehabilitation process ensures that patients will have a greater level of perceived competence and improved adherence to the program.

Authority Dimension

The authority dimension involves provision of opportunities for athletes to develop leadership skills and to gain a sense of personal control of injury rehabilitation. A mastery climate promotes active participation and a sense of ownership.10 For example, the AT could allow the patient to choose exercises for the rehabilitation session, make the decision for the time and location of the session, or help design an appropriate sport-specific rehabilitation activity. Having a sense of authority promotes commitment to the rehabilitation program.

Recognition Dimension

Recognition involves the provision of rewards, praise, and encouragement to develop interest in rehabilitation, feelings of satisfaction, and a sense of self-worth. When focused on individual improvement and