Books and Videos

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Sport Psychology: The Psychological Health of the Athlete


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In this anthology May and Asken cover a broad spectrum of topics, primarily focusing on elite athletes or those at the upper echelons of competitive sport. They state, "We have edited this book to make readily available relevant information on the psychology of sport to psychologists, physical educators, psychiatrists, coaches, trainers, athletes, and parents. The main goal of this book is to assist the reader in becoming aware of the far-reaching nature of psychology in sport. Many of the past endeavors in the psychology of sport have been rightly directed toward cultivating skills that would enhance performance. Here, however, we go beyond that model to discuss many other relevant psychological factors that relate to athletes." (p. xiii).

This goal is ambitious in scope. I believe the strength of the book is its focus on topics usually neglected in sport psychology books such as the disabled athlete, career termination, and drugs in sport. A weakness perhaps is the inability to reach such diverse audiences. Some of the chapters are quite pertinent to parents and coaches; others seem particularly targeted for clinical professionals such as psychologists and psychiatrists. Thus, readers will probably pick and choose among selected chapters for classes or as resources on a particular topic (e.g., the female athlete). Each chapter stands alone and contains a great deal of insightful information. A bonus is the inclusion of both academic and experiential sources of information to convey theoretical concepts and the impact of athletic competition on the individual's self-esteem and future lifestyle.

The book consists of 13 chapters with no apparent clustering of topics or a particular order. In addition, there is redundancy of material from that presented in earlier chapters, leading one to question the extent of editorial revision to help the chapters hang together. Nevertheless to meet my own need for orderliness, I will present an overview of the content of the chapters under the following headings: (a) sport psychology: an overview; (b) performance enhancement of the elite athlete; (c) special athlete population; (d) counseling and therapy issues in highly competitive sport; and (e) ethical issues in competitive sport.

The first heading contains two chapters, one by a former Olympian athlete and the other by a sport psychologist who has dealt extensively with Olympic athletes. Lyle Nelson's chapter, titled "Sport Psychology: The Athlete's Perspective," is actually the last chapter in the book. However, I think it would have made an excellent first chapter because few elite athletes have contributed to sport psychology books to date and this chapter is particularly well written and thoughtful. Also, none of the authors ever really define sport psychology and its scope;
Nelson does, however. He addresses the benefits of sport psychology, what sport psychology is, and categories of mental skills. It is in this last section that Nelson covers quite articulately topics such as motivation, values, and performance-enhancing attitudes, beliefs, and emotions.

Robert Nideffer’s chapter, “Applied Sport Psychology,” is actually the first chapter but I think it would have followed nicely from Nelson’s introspective approach. Nideffer focuses on the historical evolution of sport psychology, current public awareness, sport psychology organizations, the involvement of sports governing bodies, and international applied sport psychology. One disappointment with this chapter is its lack of documentation of references and its failure to establish the roots of sport psychology in social psychology rather than the sole focus on clinical psychology.

The second heading of performance enhancement of the elite athlete entails three chapters. Jerry May and Tracy Veach wrote a chapter on the U.S. Alpine Ski Team psychology program, which provides an inside look at how sport psychologists work with an elite team of athletes. Topics covered include a background of the personnel involved such as coaches, trainers, administrators, and ski industry representatives in addition to the athletes themselves, the integration of clinical, educational, and research perspectives in the psychology program, intervention strategies, and prescriptions for successful consultation.

The other two chapters are both authored by Richard Suinn, one on psychological approaches to performance enhancement and the other on behavioral approaches to stress management. I found these two chapters to be roughly written, poorly integrated, scarce on research documentation, and containing few good sport examples. For example, Suinn states that “the most commonly studied imagery rehearsal method is now visual motor behavior rehearsal (VMBR)” (p. 52). The ensuing text only refers to Suinn’s work with skiers in the 1970s. The chapter on stress management covers concentration, relaxation, self-regulation, and visualization. The information is conveyed in a disjointed manner with little documentation, and is redundant to many points made in the previous chapter. In fact, the information covered in this chapter is more clearly presented in the Williams (1986) sport psychology anthology.

The section on special athlete populations is a clear strength of this book. It includes chapters on children in sport (Dan Gould), the female athlete (Dorothy Harris), and the physically disabled athlete (Asken & Goodling). Gould’s chapter is a well-written, systematic account of the sport psychological research on organized, competitive sport for children and adolescents. A research-to-practice approach is adopted, with specific topics focused on participation motivation, competitive stress, and coaching communication styles. The chapter concludes with a dialogue on the need for coaching education programs and parent orientation meetings.

Dorothy Harris’ treatise on the female athlete is a refreshing look at the socialization barriers to participation that girls face, especially as they pass from childhood to adolescence. Special topics covered include morphology and maturaition, strength training and conditioning, menarche, contraception, pregnancy, menstrual irregularities, and career considerations.

Finally, Goodling and Asken address sport psychology and the physically disabled athlete with a particular focus on wheelchair-bound athletes. This chapter was incredibly eye-opening in terms of the historical development of sports