Sports Psychology: The Winning Edge in Sports

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Sports Psychology: The Winning Edge in Sports consists of two 30-min videos along with a 17-min audiotape focusing on the basic aspects of applied sport psychology. Andy Jacobs, a sport psychology consultant who has worked with several amateur and professional athletes, narrates the tapes. The videos focus on the psychological skills that athletes need to develop in order to maximize their performance such as goal setting, attentional focus, arousal regulation, and mental preparation.

The video starts out by redefining winning as performing your best against your own standard of excellence instead of measuring yourself against a specific opponent. Three keys to success are identified—commitment, communication, and attitude—and it is emphasized that everyday performance on and off the athletic field is affected by these. Next the focus turns to designing a mental game plan. The three stages presented are identification, assessment, and management. These amount to determining what challenges there are for the athletes, measuring these challenges, and deciding how to achieve them. The first tape ends with a discussion of mental preparation. The importance of taking time to think about an upcoming athletic event is emphasized. For example, the athlete must have a clear understanding of the different goals he or she might have in competition. A distinction is made between materialistic goals, which are those that can be measured such as batting average or field goal percentage, versus nonmaterialistic goals, which are more subjective (e.g., satisfaction) but are the real backbones of success. In addition, the importance of short-term goals is emphasized since these are the stepping stones to long-term success.

The second videotape begins with a discussion on motivation and getting psyched up for an upcoming competition. The concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are explored, the distinctions are made apparent, and the point is made that both types are important for sustaining motivation in sport. The concept of motivation is tied to the idea of arousal, and two theories about the arousal/performance relationship are presented. According to Drive Theory, the more psyched up the athletes are, the better they will perform. This approach is rejected for the more appealing Inverted-U Theory, which holds that there is an optimum level of arousal; that is, athletes who are too psyched up may have as much trouble reaching their optimal performance state as those who are bored or apathetic.
The psychological skill of concentration is presented next in the context of proper attentional focus. Different sports, and even different activities or positions within sports, require different attentional demands. Using Nideffer's approach, attention is broken down into the two dimensions of width and direction. This results in four different attentional styles; broad-external, narrow-external, broad-internal, and narrow-internal. Examples are presented concerning how these different attentional styles would function in different sport situations.

The concept of stress is explored next. Although some stress is expected and considered normal, athletes need to be aware of the stressors in their environment. A variety of potential situational stressors such as competing in front of friends and family, participating in championship events, or playing a particularly tough opponent are presented. The effect of high levels of stress on the athlete's mind and body are also discussed in light of how the athlete's responses could interfere with decision-making, coordination, and timing as well as how these increase the potential for injury.

One way to help cope with these stressors and keep anxiety under control is to develop focusing techniques. Along these lines, a brief explanation is presented of an exercise that combines visualization and relaxation. This is supplemented by the audiotape, which begins with deep relaxation exercises followed by progressive relaxation, mental relaxation, and visualization. The videotape concludes with a discussion of burnout and identifies some of its causes as unrealistic high goals, overtraining, and parental pressure. This is accompanied with some suggestions for avoiding burnout such as setting realistic goals, keeping a journal, and taking time off. In conclusion, a brief summary of the two audiotapes is presented and the point is again emphasized that winning means feeling good about one's accomplishments, regardless of whether one comes in first.

I was impressed with the technical quality of the video. Its filming of athletic events as well as interviews with various athletes, coaches, and teaching professionals was especially well done. A variety of sports were included and the action shots definitely added to the viewing enjoyment. These anecdotal reports were both interesting and insightful, and the viewer should be able to relate to them easily. Jacobs did an excellent job of narrating the tape in a relaxed and informative manner. A lot of basic information is presented for viewers who are not familiar with the principles of applied sport psychology.

Although I liked the presentation of information and quality of the video itself, a couple of omissions limit its effectiveness. First, the video contains very little of the nuts and bolts of actually learning and using these psychological techniques except for the 17-min audiotape. How does one learn how to relax, develop imagery skills, increase his or her concentration, set realistic goals, or build confidence? More specific exercises and demonstrations would have been helpful. An athlete could have been shown actually going through some of the mental skills training program. Things such as imagery vividness and controllability, goal specificity, difficulty and proximity, replacing negative with positive self-talk, and deep breathing could have been discussed and demonstrated.

Second, the tape provides little direction concerning how best to use it. For instance, when should it be viewed, and should both parts be viewed together? Is the tape for coaches, athletes, or both? How often should an athlete practice these psychological skills in order to learn them sufficiently for use in actual com-