

# Willing to Win

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## 1.0 Introduction

People usually look on the psychological side of sport as being something abstract and therefore difficult to understand. That is the main reason why they find it hard to do something practical and effective to improve their attitudes to sport. The psychological side of sport is often left to chance. You could draw a parallel between psychological and the weather: everybody talks about it, but nobody does anything! Understanding comes before improvement. We first try to understand what the problem is and give it a name, and then we go on to consider how the problem might be remedied.

## 2.0 Mental Control of Performance

### 2.1 *Controlling Impulses*

What is the connection between what happens in our mind (mental processes) and our athletic performance? It is the body that is the motor we use in sport, and that produces the performance. Whether the result is good or bad depends, among other things, upon how well we have succeeded in getting the body to do what we want it to do. The body functions like a kind of tool, in the same way that a hammer is controlled by the body. If there are no mental control impulses, there will be no activity and no movement. What are the mental processes that direct our athletic performance positively or negatively? There are three principal types of impulses that control performance:

- a. Feelings
- b. Thoughts
- c. Mental energy

There is a strong connection between a person's feelings and that person's performance. If the feelings change, then the body's capacity to perform also changes. In a similar way, changes in thought lead to changes in the body's capacity to perform. When mental energy is reduced, you cannot perform as well as when you are rested and full of mental energy. There are definite connections between the controlling impulses themselves. Changes in feelings prompt new thoughts. If we feel really happy, for instance, then we feel more rested and the energy level is raised. If the opponents score a goal, we can feel discouraged; we think negatively and feel heavy. In other words, the energy level is reduced.

## 2.2 Positive or Negative Mentality

*Psyche* is the word used to describe a person's whole state of mind. This can either be negative or positive, and is rarely both at the same time. Now and then, we can feel neutral, but otherwise we are either mostly positive or mostly negative.

By *positive mentality* we mean feelings, thoughts and an energy level that steer the body in an advantageous way. A negative mentality is the opposite: feelings, thoughts and energy that are negative in character, thus controlling the body, and hence the performance, in a negative way. Mental training, mental preparation and warm-up should aim at precisely this: to put the athlete or player into a positive frame of mind, and to prevent him/her from slipping into negative behaviour.

Sportsmen and women are usually preoccupied with what their body is doing. Working with the mind often seems abstract. One's eyes have difficulty seeing directly what is wrong mentally. Just by learning to recognise and interpret the signs that reveal the underlying mental state, the coach or athlete can find a solution to the problem. If the athlete usually shows good technique while training, and poorer technique while competing, the cause of the discrepancy may be found in the mind. Coaches who know their athletes should learn what to do to overcome such problems. It is also very important for the athlete to study himself and get to know himself and the way he reacts.

Examples of how several top athletes feel about themselves in relation to positive or negative attitudes:

*Table 1: Comparison of positive and negative attitudes.*

Positive	Negative
1. Raring to go!	1. Passive and nervous
2. Strong will-power and motivation	2. Tired, sluggish
3. Concentrating fully	3. Divided, indecisive
4. Secure and in harmony with yourself	4. Insecure, out of balance
5. Light in your movements	5. Heavy and slow
6. Happy and in a good mood	6. Very low - everything feels heavy
7. Free from conflicts	7. Full of problems and conflicts
8. Strong, with great self-confidence	8. Insecure, out of balance
9. Free from performance anxiety	9. Afraid, lying low, not daring to go for it
10. Bold enough to go well and aim high	10. Anxious about your performance

## Feelings and Performance

### 3.0 Arousal

Arousal is a term used to describe the level of activity in the nervous system. This can take the form of electrical as well as chemical activity in the brain and nervous system. Tension or arousal is not only caused by nervousness, as many might believe. It can just as easily increase with added motivation, aggression, physical activity or well being.

Fear	Nervousness	Motivation
Aggression	Enjoyment	Physical Activity

A number of research studies show that there is a clear connection between an athlete's state of arousal and his/her performance. Performance depends on both the degree of arousal involved and the reason for arousal. Arousal that is due to fear and aggression has a fundamentally different effect on performance from that caused by high motivation, enjoyment or physical activity.

One cannot, therefore, predict the performance capacity of an athlete or player from the degree of arousal alone. Thus, if you want to increase arousal, you should preferably look for ways of creating motivation and well being, and avoid methods which bring out strong fear or aggression. Arousal varies from one individual to another.

Recent research and experience have shown that the concept of arousal is more complex than was previously believed. In each situation, everyone has his/her own ideal level of arousal. Some individuals can tolerate, and need, a high level of arousal, others a much lower level. Therefore it cannot positively be said that a specific level of arousal is ideal for each particular sport.

As a beginner, an athlete generally tolerates a much lower level of arousal than when he has learned the movements and is able to perform them automatically. If you are an athlete you should observe yourself systematically, particularly during competitions, and should afterwards make notes and analyses, either alone or together with your coach. "What did I do the day before?" "How did the preparations for the competition go?" "What was my mood when I woke up that morning?" "Was there anything special that put me in a better/worse mood?" "Did I have butterflies in my stomach?" "When and why?" "And what of my expectations, my sense of security, my feelings about myself?" A run-through such as this is particularly constructive when you have done either very well or very badly. In this way you might gain something, even from a bad competition. Observe, make notes and then analyse, and gradually it will become clear what level of arousal is best for you.

### ***3.1 Not Enough Arousal***

There are some athletes who have difficulty in working up enough tension - particularly older, more hardened athletes with lots of experience. It can be difficult for them to "switch on." In such cases, various exercises towards building up arousal, motivation and well being may be used to good effect. Most of us are most highly aroused when the chances are 50/50 - in other words, when the possibilities of winning are as great as those of losing.

*The general rule is that the more sure you are of the outcome of a competition, the lower the arousal level.*

If you are sure of either winning or losing, then it is difficult to get keyed up. A good beginning, therefore, is to be a little unsure of what the outcome may be, but also to have a lot of self-confidence. The capacity to deal with doubts about the outcome of a competition is based on an individual's self-confidence. Those who have a great deal of self-confidence can put up with more doubt about the outcome

than athletes who are unsure and doubtful about themselves. This is something that coaches should keep in mind when talking to athletes before a competition.

### ***3.2 Basic Arousal and Additional Stress***

Each and every athlete has what is usually known as a basic level of arousal. Competitive situations create additional tension. The sum of these two items makes up the athlete's total level of arousal.

Athletes with low basic level of arousal generally tolerate stress better than those whose basic arousal level is high. This is the general rule, but it must be remembered that no two individuals can ever be compared in such a simple way because everyone tolerates tension differently. Rowing is considered a high arousal sport along with wrestling and weight lifting.

### ***3.3 Sports and Aggression Don't Go Together***

Many sports such as shooting, archery and tennis tolerate very little tension, particularly tension caused by aggression and nervousness. Other sports such as soccer, team handball, ice hockey and running demand an extremely high level of fine concentration. Such sports are characterised by heavy demands on technique, but they are less taxing to strength and endurance. Rowing is a sport, along with weight-lifting and wrestling, that requires strength and benefits from high levels of endurance, and thus requires great mobilisation of physical resources, together with a higher level of arousal.

Sports requiring a high level of technical expertise such as shooting and archery have a lower level of stress tolerance than those involving simpler tasks - or tasks which are perceived to be easier, such as rowing and cycling. The simpler the task, the easier it is to achieve the right level of arousal in order to perform the task correctly. Obviously, the tasks might be judged easy or difficult depending on how well the techniques have been learned and to what degree they have become automatic.

Coaches and athletes should carry out a systematic observation and analysis which should include finding answers to the following questions:

- What degree of arousal is most appropriate for the athlete or team?
- What is the main arousal factor in each individual? Happiness? Motivation? Nervousness? etc.

Accordingly, you should discuss with the athlete or team the best way of adapting the environment (e.g., coaches, managers, friendships, preparations) so that each individual may achieve a level of arousal as close as possible to his most appropriate level while competing. Important hints to remember here are:

- Become aware.
- Observe.
- Observe yourself.
- Analyse.
- Discuss openly.

- Treat each individual separately.
- Everyone helps everyone.

## **4.0 Nervousness**

### ***4.1 The Way the Body Reacts***

All athletes have at one time or another felt nervous, so you will know how it feels. Nerves are particularly common in connection with important competitions. You are afraid to compete, afraid of not performing well. You may also feel insecure about the outcome of the competition. If you feel you are not going to do very well, you easily become nervous. Your own expectations and those of others tend to make you even more nervous. You are disturbed about what other people will say - what the media will say and write.

Nerves are a very potent source of tension. They have various purely physical effects. Let us now consider a few of the reactions that result from nerves.

### ***4.2 Stress***

Nervousness causes a number of observable stress reactions. Some of these we may quickly notice in ourselves: the heart beats strongly, we breathe faster, our muscles tense up. It is also known that as blood pressure rises blood is transported from the internal organs out to the muscles that will be working. The body produces various stress hormones. The most well known are adrenaline and noradrenaline, but there are others too. The liver produces more sugar, and extra fat is released into the bloodstream.

Generally, all of these are signs that the body is preparing itself for great physical effort, for the expected physical work. This might also be termed mobilisation of resources. The body can often perform greater physical work as a result of nervousness than during average arousal. But - and this is important - the body reacts in practically the same way to feelings of aggression, motivation, happiness and well being, and to physical activity. These are the other sources of increased arousal.

If nervousness becomes too great, the body reacts in undesirable ways and performance capacity is inhibited. The muscles which slow down the body's movements - the so-called antagonists - react too strongly. The body thus begins to work less efficiently, and a great deal of energy is used up without producing a corresponding effect in performance. The body functions in the same way as does a car when the driver uses the accelerator and brake at the same time.

In sports that require fine motor skills, such as shooting, golf or archery, nervousness tends to make the muscles tighten up and create far too much tension. Jerking and shaking are the result. This is usually called tremoring, and can have an adverse effect on performance. In such sports, it is important to keep the body steady in order to maintain precision.

Instead, some athletes try to achieve a state that produces high activation of the action muscles and low activation of the braking muscles. This state is difficult to achieve when you are very nervous. It is easier to achieve this state when a high

level of arousal has been achieved through sources other than nervousness or stress. It is important that coaches and athletes consider their own sport and figure out the best way to achieve motivation and arousal without at the same time creating performance anxiety and excessive nervousness.

#### ***4.3 The Way the Mind Reacts***

Nervousness produces a number of psychological reactions, which in turn also greatly affect the body's capacity to perform. Let us consider some of the common types of reaction.

Increased nervousness sends a warning to the brain. Sometimes the warning is so intense that a mental block occurs. The mind's capacity to resolve problems and interpret situations is thus greatly reduced. You find it more difficult to think and more difficult to understand. You are less able to take in signals from the outside world, for instance to gauge quickly an opponent's reactions. Mental blocks also mean that you react much too slowly to sudden changes in the situation or to other signals. It might almost be said that the brain becomes less effective as a data processor. While *slight* nervousness often sharpens and increases concentration, a *lot* of nervousness has the opposite effect, namely to reduce the mind's capacity to think and react.

#### ***4.4 Inexplicable Mistakes***

Severe nerves can cause an athlete or player to make quite fundamental mistakes in a competition. The coach sees this and can't believe his eyes! What came easily in training now simply doesn't work at all. Such excessive nervousness blocks impulses both to and from the brain. When under the effects of stress or severe nerves, the brain begins to function in an entirely different way. If you are in a highly nervous state, your capacity to concentrate is weakened so that you are very easily disturbed. There is therefore a perfectly natural explanation for such "inexplicable" mistakes.

#### ***4.5 Body Awareness Is Reduced***

When you are very nervous, your body awareness is reduced. Nervous people have difficulty, for example, in judging body positions, getting rhythm into movements, etc. A sailor once gave a very good description of the effects of nerves: "It feels like sailing with boxing gloves on." There is a lack of positive feeling. Nervousness creates a kind of "strange" feeling in us - a feeling of "distance" from what we are doing. In sports where fine motor skills and fine concentration are important, nervousness and aggression quickly produce a deterioration in technique, and feedback mechanisms are also disturbed.

Another reaction which is connected with nerves is that of feeling heavy and weak. A wrestler once said that his body felt as heavy as lead before important matches and he felt completely weak. Such reactions are not unusual if you are very nervous. The athlete describes this as being "out of form."

#### ***4.6 Negative Learning***

Nervousness and fear can form a basis for negative learning and mental blocks. Those who are excessively nervous run a serious risk of spoiling their technique through negative learning.

#### ***4.7 Different Reactions to Nerves***

Nervousness affects different people in different ways. In some cases it can be clearly seen that a person is nervous - particularly in extroverts who give vent to their feelings. But other people hide their feelings and bottle up their nerves inside themselves. These are often the quiet types. It can be difficult to tell whether such a person is nervous or not.

#### ***4.8 Controlling Nerves***

Even if an athlete "controls" (i.e., hides) his nerves so that no one notices anything unusual, this does not necessarily mean that he has control over the way in which they affect him. In some athletes, nerves are allowed to "run free" within them; they are not controlled or channelled in any particular way. This affects their capacity to think and to concentrate, thus worsening their performance. Other athletes have a powerful capacity to control their nerves, even though they may be severe and difficult to master. They will not be beaten or controlled by them but can actually fight them - and force them to be a positive element in the performance itself.

#### ***4.9 Types of Nervousness***

The present state of knowledge suggests that there are probably two kinds of nervousness. The first consists purely of anxiety about performing or competing. The second is more a kind of tense excitement regarding the result of the competition - a kind of tense exhilaration. The first type of nervousness appears to have a more disruptive effect on performance than the second. The two types might best be summed up as follows:

1. Nervous Anxiety
2. Nervous Exhilaration

This second type of nervousness seems to produce a quite specific kind of mood: you feel nervous and yet happy at the same time - rested, eager to compete and really looking forward to the race. This nervous exhilaration is the more positive type, quite different from the nervous anxiety which is associated with defensive behaviour and poor expectations.

#### ***4.10 Nervousness by Association***

If you are nervous in a certain situation, then fear or anxiety can very easily become associated with anything which happens to be around. It can be connected to things which are purely incidental to that situation - a particular dressing room, a gate or a scoreboard, for example. Nervousness before a particular competition can lead to nervousness in facing certain opponents. This can, by association, even lead to nervousness about the stadium in which you are competing. Nervousness spreads by association from the original cause to something else in the same situation.

#### ***4.11 Nervousness and Self-Confidence***

There is always a close connection between an athlete's nerves and his personality. Nerves are often experienced in such a way that they undermine his self-confidence. Reduced self-confidence in turn makes him more nervous still - and the result is a vicious circle! One of the conditions for remaining a good athlete is to have the capacity to keep a high level of self-confidence while competing, no matter how well or badly it goes.

One of the most important tasks of the coach, therefore, is to help the athlete to build up strong, stable self-confidence. This can be observed by studying how people behave while competing. It can even be seen with the naked eye: the more nervous you are, the less self-confident you are - and vice versa. Learning to reduce or control one's nerves is one of the essential tools for maintaining self-confidence. Severe nerves disturb the mind in such a way as to reduce the level of performance.

When competing in minor competitions or against weaker opponents, it can be very easy to control one's nerves and maintain self-confidence. When racing difficult competitions or the feared opponent, an athlete's ability to maintain self-confidence is put to the test. Here, therefore, is an important point to note: self-confidence depends not only on the situation but also on how nervous you are.

The best athletes are those who have the capacity to maintain their self-confidence when it really counts. Let us therefore underline the fact that the only way to maintain one's self-confidence is to be able to control one's nerves.

*Key phrases for coaches and teammates to remember:*

1. An athlete should feel accepted by the coach - no matter what the outcome.
2. The athlete should feel accepted by his teammates - no matter what the outcome.
3. The athlete should get no negative comments from the group - no matter what the outcome.
4. The athlete should receive frankness, support and encouragement from the group.

These four points are most important, not only for controlling nerves, but also for maintaining and strengthening self-confidence.

- Self-confidence is built up in a positive atmosphere.

- Self-confidence is reduced in a negative atmosphere.

*How can severe nervousness be reduced?*

- Look for social support - talk to those people who usually help you!
- Don't try to hide your nerves! Talk about them instead. Remember that your opponents are nervous too.
- Accept the fact that nervousness is completely natural. Accept yourself, even if you are nervous.
- Try to find the cause of your nervousness. Give it a name and shed some light on it.
- Keep expectations and outside pressure at a distance. Do something that is fun; listen to music; play and make jokes.
- Try not to be too serious. Ask the question: "What is the worst that can happen if I fail?"
- Ask another question: "What are the chances that this will happen?"
- Think realistically. There will be plenty of competitions after this one.
- Do what you usually do and follow your usual routine. Make everything around the competition as simple as possible.
- Avoid thinking about things that make you nervous.
- Try to expand your perceived performance limits.
- Learn to relax. Learn to think positively.
- Do mental training. Jog a little - or do a long, hard physical warm-up. Remember that everything will continue as usual tomorrow.
- Think through the competition several times in advance and get used to the idea.

## **5.0 Fight and Flight Reactions**

When people are under pressure in one way or another, there are two ways in which they might behave: either they will fight or they will run away. Fight reactions are quite different from aggression. Fighting is a goal-directed, positive and attacking attitude. Typical fight reactions are when you maintain your self-confidence and keep to your objectives. Attention is directed to the competition itself. There are no thoughts about running away or self-defence. You feel secure and are on the offensive. On the other hand, a flight reaction is when you try, in some way or another, to escape mentally from the situation you are in. Instead of concentrating on giving a good performance, you use all your mental energy in trying to protect yourself. You become preoccupied with yourself and try to distance yourself from the competition.

How much stress can a person take before he experiences a flight reaction? Some people can take very little stress and are easily on the defensive; others can handle stress very well and at the same time remain in a fighting or an attacking frame of mind.

Why do flight reactions work negatively? There are several reasons for this. Flight reactions reduce self-confidence, and behaviour becomes defensive and fugitive. Defence reactions take several different forms. One of these is a tendency to lower your expectations, perhaps becoming satisfied with fourth place when before the competition you were aiming to be first. Therefore, if you are

subject to flight behaviour, then you should work towards finding a way back into the game - towards fighting back.

Run away and you become powerless.

Flight behaviour can cause a number of negative reactions. You become apathetic, indifferent, useless. This is a very common reaction. When the pressure is too much, many athletes drown in apathy and indifference. In other words, they lose motivation during the competition.

Loss of motivation is a common means of explaining away flight behaviour.

### ***5.1 Motivation and Flight***

Athletes who are usually motivated but seem to lose their motivation in important competitions are not in fact suffering from lack of motivation. Their behaviour is a kind of mental defence. The remedy, therefore, is not to try to motivate the athlete; instead, you should try to free him from his stress load. If you are successful in this, then his motivation will come back. Another type of flight behaviour is well known: the athlete blames outside circumstances, other people's behaviour, etc. The collective term for this is excuses. These are nothing but a form of flight behaviour. Athletes not only use excuses and poor explanations when they find themselves in a flight position. There is a long list of psychological defence mechanisms.

One particular expression of flight behaviour is that of exaggerated humour. You stop taking the whole thing seriously, and joke and fool around, often with a morbid sense of humour. You joke about the situation at hand in a forced way: "Well, folks, this isn't a matter of life or death; after all, it's only a game!" Here are a few examples of poor explanations that are well known to most experienced athletes, but which are also examples of flight behaviour:

- I've trained so little lately.
- I actually feel I've injured myself.
- I don't like this track.
- I don't like that opponent.
- There's too much chlorine in the water.
- I slept badly last night.
- This food is ghastly.
- With a coach like this, what can you expect?

Poor explanations are as many and unproductive as weeds in a lawn! You search, and think that you've found something to hide behind - that the cause of failure lies somewhere outside yourself. This is a way of finding an excuse for a poor performance.

Flight due to stress and habitual flight

What we have just discussed could be called flight due to stress. The flight behaviour occurs when the athlete finds himself under pressure. But the symptoms disappear as soon as the causes of the stress are removed.

Another kind of flight reactions can be described as habitual flight behaviour. This is a learned behaviour. It can occur even on occasions when the athlete is not under any special pressure. It is because through learning he has become accustomed to defensive behaviour. He gives up beforehand and has lost the competition long before it reaches the decisive moment. Such behaviour is typical of people who have defensive or pessimistic personalities, whether they are under pressure or not.

Habitual flight is not necessarily deeply embedded in an athlete's personality. Flight behaviour can just as easily be associated with habits of imagination or thought. But when athletes become aware of such habits, they can very quickly show dramatic improvements in performance. Flight behaviour often leads to defensive thinking. This reduces performance capacity and can even lead to mental blocks, resulting in poor performance.

The important question is this: How do you get an athlete out of his flight or defensive position and into an attacking one? The following are some steps which can improve the behaviour:

1. Try to reduce nerves - among other things, with the help of mental training.
2. Try to reduce pressure on the athlete by keeping to realistic expectations.
3. Give the athlete as much security and support as possible.
4. Reduce the athlete's desire to escape by making him aware of this defensive behaviour.
5. The coach should take over responsibility for the outcome of the competition.
6. Reduce performance anxiety. Help the athlete to move into an attacking position.
7. Help the athlete to work on his perceived performance limits.

## **6.0 The Will to Attack**

One of the main requirements for a good result in sport is to be on the offensive. You must attack and go for it. This is the opposite of being on the defensive - waiting and behaving defensively. The one who is on the offensive fights. This, in fact, means that all your energy and attention is directed to the competition itself, and that you think as little as possible about irrelevant things.

But note that there is a great deal of difference between being on the offensive and being aggressive. The person who is on the offensive is committed to the task at hand. The aggressive person is directed by emotions and is living out his own conflicts. It is necessary to feel secure and self-confident before you can consider yourself as being on the offensive. Obviously, you must be motivated for the task and in this the will plays a very important role.

### **6.1 Will Power**

Our will power is what enables us to complete tasks for which we have very little desire - perhaps even an aversion; for example, when we are tired or suffering from lactic acid pain. Practical experience has shown that those with the strongest will

power, who can force themselves through adverse circumstances such as fatigue, are the ones who are best able to exploit their resources. In otherwise equal conditions, the winner will be the one with the strongest will power.

In sports that primarily require endurance, it is usually a question of who most wants to win. Training methods today are often much the same, so it is will power that often decides who wins and who comes second or third. The person who stays in an attacking frame of mind doesn't usually give up, however great the difficulties may seem to be. To give up means to lose, not only the part of the competition already completed, but also that which remains. Athletes who think on the offensive usually regard competitions and the best possible effort to win as one and the same thing.

### ***6.2 Training the Will to Attack***

To be on the offensive, it is not enough to compete to the utmost. Behaviour in a competition often reflects behaviour while training; therefore, it is in the first place by training that you learn not to give up. Experience shows that athletes in stressful competitive situations often revert to the kind of behaviour they have learned during training. If they are passive, defensive and slipshod while training, then they will probably have the same attitude when competing. Staying on the offensive depends upon the athlete's strength of will. But more than that, will power also needs training.

A few years ago, Bjorn Borg spoke about his training principles while at a training camp. All of these ten basic rules were connected with just such an attacking frame of mind. For example, he never skipped a training session, even when he didn't feel like training. One of his goals was to do his best in every situation - including training. Moreover, while practising he mobilised 100% of his concentration. For Bjorn Borg, training will power was pure routine.

### ***6.3 What Are You Fighting Against?***

Many athletes like to fight against their opponents. But it is important to be aware that such an attitude can have an undesirable psychological effect. The whole thing can become a kind of social struggle which leads the athlete too far into the emotional area. This is just one of a number of reasons why many athletes prefer to fight against an object connected with the competition, rather than with the person they meet.

What we are trying to describe here may seem unfamiliar or strange to some people, but we suggest that you think carefully through this subject and consider its new possibilities. In ball games, for example, you might see the ball itself as the challenge; in discus, javelin or hammer throwing, the challenge may be the object thrown, or maybe the distance to the record mark. The focus of the attack should be connected with the actual result. Thus the opponent as a person no longer becomes a challenge. The ball, or whatever object is seen as the challenge, is dependent on you alone, which means you can have control over it. Your opponent on the other hand can never be under your control.

Strengthen your will to attack!

### **6.4 Training Will Power**

You should learn to regard a poor competition as good training and valuable experience. It is precisely during bad patches - when you don't succeed - that your will power is trained. To show will power and to be on the offensive when everything is functioning will is not very difficult. On the other hand, if you give up when the going gets tough, when you feel bogged down, when the opponents score a goal, or when someone else makes a record breaking jump, then you will develop a negative attitude which you will remember again during later competitions. All training is an adaptation to load, and the same applies to mental training. Training will power is a form of mental training.

Rudik, the Russian scientist, suggests the following to develop will power:

1. Start with smaller problems. Even trivial problems have meaning in will power training.
2. You yourself must want to solve the problem.
3. When more difficult tasks are involved, you must come to realise that they can be solved.
4. All exercises to develop will power must be carried out energetically. Slow, slovenly actions work negatively.
5. You must have your whole attention directed towards the task at hand.
6. Tasks to train will power endurance don't necessarily have to be done very often. They should, however, teach you to cope with mental load over long periods.
7. Exercises or tasks for training will power must have a definite goal in mind. A will power effort that doesn't lead to the achievement of an objective often has a negative effect.

Remember, learn to be on the offensive with the help of positive thinking. Be on the offensive during training as well as when competing. Learn not to be afraid to lose - but at the same time fight to win!

### **7.0 Aggression, Irritation and the Like**

It is when an athlete feels nervous or weak that he can become aggressive. This doesn't usually happen when he is feeling strong and calm. Such a reaction (feeling nervous and weak) shows that the athlete is unable to handle the situation in the correct and appropriate way. There are, however, cases where aggression is a form of fight reaction. To bring out aggression in athletes is both ethically indefensible and, insofar as performance is concerned, quite inappropriate. Flight behaviour, as well as an arrogant, overbearing attitude, can easily lead to aggression.

#### **7.1 Self Punishment**

When athletes don't do very well during or after a competition, they often feel that some form of self-punishment is called for. In their inner dialogue they give way to irritable and aggressive self-criticism, which can unfortunately turn into learned behaviour. The memory of that poor competition surfaces again during later competitions, and this can have a destructive effect, either consciously or

unconsciously, upon the athlete's state of mind. Such self-punishment does not serve any useful purpose. This inner criticism is often distorted, exaggerated and destructive, and those who have such tendencies should therefore take active steps to correct them. Athletes often live through competitions again and again, particularly if those competitions have been big and important. Here again, self-criticism - sometimes quite aggressive - is a common occurrence. It can take the form of self-punishment, which must be resolved by training.

## **8.0 Performance Anxiety**

One of the motives for participating in competitive sports is the desire for improvement. This desire can, however, sometimes be dogged by the fear of failure. It may, for example, crop up when we think too hard about the results and ask questions along the line of "What if...?"

### ***8.1 The Need to Analyse***

Unfortunately many coaches have a tendency to use athletes to satisfy their own needs. When we hear coaches use the expressions such as "Would you like to be on my team?" or "This is the way I want it," we cannot expect much objectivity. The coach who wants to develop and help his athletes should sit down and study their personalities. He should then go on to consider why each athlete is the way he or she is. What is it that actually creates the performance anxiety?

If athletes feel that great expectations are being placed on them, then they will tend to develop performance anxiety. They may become accustomed to hearing sour or negative comments when things haven't gone so well.

Sometimes it can happen that the coach praises the athlete when things go well, but is quiet when things go badly. In many teams, performance anxiety arises when a lost game results in loud exclamations and heated exchanges between players, or between coach and players. This way to tackle this unfortunate development is to take it easy, and embark on an objective and constructive analysis.

### ***8.2 The Right to Fail***

In order to succeed in sports, an athlete or player must be allowed to fail.

No one likes to lose, but when things do go badly you should work at keeping fear and anxiety away. Everyone who has been involved with sports and has had high ambitions knows that you never try harder than when things have gone badly. Failing is in itself more of a punishment than any of the other possible consequences. Here, coaches and friends have an opportunity to help those with problems to regain their normal performance level.

When performance anxiety is strong, the athlete is forced onto the defensive. Performance anxiety is felt more acutely when an athlete has great expectations placed upon him before a competition, and finds that heavy demands are being made on him by the press, spectators, supporters, officials or board of directors.

### ***8.3 Being Affected By Other People***

Many athletes or players are bothered by what other people think and feel about their performance. A variation of this is fear of doing too well. This can happen when they become aware of their opponents' reactions, even while they themselves are in the process of winning the match or competition. They imagine how others experience the same situation and imagine their reactions. If this happens, they cease to concentrate on their own performance and their part in the competition takes second place. This type of fear can even be found among top athletes. This phenomenon has its origins in childhood experiences, such as when grown-ups divided up sweets with absolute fairness. No one was allowed to have more than anyone else. Sharing out had to be absolutely fair. Such memories can leave their mark, with the result that you are reluctant to acknowledge a win: "It was just luck."

Such a remark is common among athletes with this fear of doing too well: "Well, yes, we won - but it was because my team-mates played so well." When an athlete with such tendencies does succeed, he often tries to escape and doesn't want to be interviewed, but if he doesn't manage to get away, he often speaks of "luck", "a lucky track", "my opponents had a bad day", etc.

Parents and coaches often have difficulty in being able to draw the line between positive motivation - stimulating and encouraging - and negative methods such as pressure, demands, high expectations and lack of acceptance. Such attitudes destroy self-confidence and create anxiety.

Anxiety is very common among athletes. But it can be effectively worked upon, either by the athlete himself or by athlete and coach together.

### ***8.4 Performance Anxiety in the Group***

Clubs and teams should be deliberately trained towards tolerance and acceptance. A behaviour pattern can be trained in the same way as a movement. Here, the coach has the key role because the responsibility for the spirit of the team (or individual) rests with that person. At the beginning of this chapter, we underlined the importance of tolerance, both because it is essential to mankind as a whole and because it reduces performance anxiety.

Note to junior coaches: Young athletes should be guided safely, calmly and carefully into competitive situations. The following key phrases are recommended: modest demands - no high expectations - lots of praise - free rein for positive comments - reduction of negative comments. Be sparing with criticism. If criticism is necessary, make sure that it takes a positive form and is fully understood.

### ***8.5 Extending One's Perceived Performance Limits***

An athlete's perception of his performance can be graphically displayed as a scale between the ceiling and the floor. The ceiling corresponds to the performance which the athlete feels is his best (i.e., when he feels he can readily use his talent and ability to its fullest extent). The floor marks the level below which the athlete is afraid of going, when nothing works.

Some athletes are very clear about where their floor lies, but others have a more variable floor performance. Now and then one hears a remark like "I will not accept a score worse than..."

The lowest limit that an athlete accepts is shown in the diagram as the lower performance limit. It is at this level that the athlete has difficulty in accepting himself. He may express this by becoming disappointed, thinking negative thoughts, punishing himself mentally, becoming nervous, and so on. Such "bad" performances make him feel uncomfortable inside.

While many athletes have problems accepting performances below a certain level, one seldom hears anyone complain that he cannot accept a good performance. But subconsciously an upper performance limit is also felt to exist. Tension, fear or inner resistance - blocks in one form or another - are the reactions as one moves towards this maximum performance.

The perceived upper performance limit contains a mental block - an obstacle to the athlete's achieving the levels indicated by his talent and state of training. The subconscious reacts against his breaking through this limit.

### **8.6 Mirror Reflections**

There is often a clear relationship between an athlete's lower limit (A) and his upper limit (B). The upper limit is often a mirror reflection of the lower. The reaction of the subconscious could be described as "I can't make it to B because I don't accept anything lower than A." Everyone is interested in pushing B upwards. But instead you should work on accepting lower results than A - because B can then move by itself. Thus, if you can move limit A downwards, then B often lifts automatically.

What you should try to achieve is a feeling of freedom within yourself, whether towards success or towards failure. The objective with work of this kind is to get rid of blocking mechanisms in the subconscious, and to free yourself of old habits that have become embedded there.

### **8.7 Thinking Realistically**

One way of dealing with performance anxiety might simply be called thinking realistically. A team manager might say something like this before the beginning of the season:

*Our purpose and your objective are to improve the general level of performance. During the year, you will participate in perhaps 20 matches or competitions. Now it is a proven fact that no one can do well every time. No one can go through an athletic career without having a poor score now and then. From what we read in reports, records and the like, we know that some competitions can go extremely badly. We can do nothing but accept this as fact.*

*We are agreed then, that your goal is to raise the general level of performance. Previously you were not as skilled as you are today. Every competition is different. If you are happy to do well in 15 competitions out of 20, then you must logically accept that five of them will be worse than the others. This fits in with what I said before. You don't know when the bad events will be; but if one of them occurs today, you must logically accept it. Sometime you must have an off day.*

This type of discussion usually reduces performance anxiety, and for this reason if you enter competitions with the idea that "today is the day when I must do really well" - or something similar - then you will be likely to do badly in more than five events out of twenty.

### ***Suggestions for the coach***

Perhaps the most important key word for reducing performance fear is acceptance. No matter whether a performance is considered to be good or bad, the athlete should accept himself. Moreover, it is also important that teammates and club-mates accept each other, no matter what.

Coaches should think in the long term. The performance anxiety shown by an athlete in one competition often has a tendency to carry over to the next. Then the athletes need the help of their coach. If the coach is preoccupied with his own reactions to such an event, the athlete can't expect much assistance from him.

### *Key phrases for the athletes*

- Create security
- Build trust
- Show openness
- Accept the result, whatever it is
- Look for a positive group spirit
- Aim at togetherness in the group
- Use relaxation training
- Use mental training
- Think realistically

### *Key phrases for teams*

- Accept your teammates, even when things go badly
- Show friendship, particularly when things go badly
- Be generous with praise to teammates
- Support teammates, particularly when things go badly
- It is when you are down that togetherness is really important

### *Key phrases for coaches*

- Always accept them, particularly when things go badly
- Show friendship, but use common sense when praising them
- Help them keep their feet on the ground when things go well

## **9.0 Pressure From Expectations**

In all sports one of the principal, and most common causes of over-nervousness and flight reaction is pressure from expectations.

Demands placed upon the athlete by other people - parents, friends, coaches, press and spectators - often conspire to produce performance anxiety. One of the worst situations is when pressure from expectations is combined with negative reactions caused by a poor performance.

Athletes who suffer from so-called "competition nerves" are made more nervous still by pressure from expectations. Athletes who are more robust mentally or have a more phlegmatic, outwardly nonchalant attitude, are the ones who are best able to tackle the pressure from expectations. Sometimes, such expectations can be precisely what these athletes need in order to get keyed up into an attacking frame of mind and give a good performance. Such athletes compete best as favourites.

### ***9.1 Praise - A Two-Edged Sword***

In general, praise is something positive and stimulating for athletes.

But praise and encouragement can also work the other way. Praise from some people can be worthless: when people always have praise flying around them, they cease to derive any benefit from it. Certain kinds of praise and encouragement can actually be directly negative. People who unexpectedly receive some acknowledgement of praise may sometimes react to it with a comment like this: "They applaud me. Now they certainly expect me to do very well..."

When praising, you should avoid commenting upon the performance itself and concentrate on building up the athlete's self-confidence. In other words, praise should be directed at the person and not at the performance. In this way, you minimise the pressure. The athlete then doesn't experience such personal praise as a form of expectation but as a positive appraisal of himself.

The athlete can work alone on this problem of pressure from expectations, or else together with his coach. Finally, to summarise the effects that expectations can have and why they may happen:

1. They often create anxiety and nervousness.
2. They can easily result in flight behaviour.
3. They can produce defensive reactions.
4. They are often implicit even when nothing is actually said, and they often come from parents.
5. An athlete's own expectations can make him his own worst enemy.
6. An athlete's own expectations are often the result of expectations placed upon him by others.

*Key phrases*

- Coaches and athletes can create an atmosphere which protects athletes from the pressure of expectations, simply by talking through the problem, openly and freely.
- Coaches and athletes can talk through the problem in such a way that athletes can express their point of view without having to listen to moralising, preaching or unnecessary explanations.
- Expectations are often created when an athlete misunderstands remarks made by a coach or a parent, but such misunderstandings are quickly cleared up by frank discussion.

Negative feelings towards the next competition can be prevented from becoming lodged in the athlete's mind, simply by talking - he can "get it off his chest" and prevent such an undesirable tendency.

## **10.0 Security**

Athletes have a great need for security, first of all in relation to themselves. Security rests on self-respect, so the need for security reaches out towards people round about - parents, spouses, coaches, friends and, further away, fans and spectators.

### ***10.1 The Social Platform***

Some people have a safe and secure platform built into their own mind, and are therefore not dependent upon the behaviour and reactions of others. But the vast majority of people are heavily dependent upon their environment.

Lack of security is very common, particularly in relation to competitions. The nervousness and tension often observed in athletes are due to feelings of insecurity in relation to the competition.

One of a coach's most important tasks is to help the athlete to maintain a sense of group security as much as possible. Security must be built up over a period of time - often over a long time. It is certainly not something that can be created immediately before an important competition or situation of stress. Security must be built up slowly - and often rests on trust, both between coach and athlete, and between the athletes themselves.

Such a trusting relationship is built up when they fully accept each other without reservations. If the coach makes it clear that they should accept one another, no matter what the performance will be at the time, the athletes in the team will tend to give help and support to each other. The idea is that each and everyone should have a fundamentally positive and supportive attitude towards the others.

The social platform provides an important psychological framework, so it is vital for coaches and managers to work hard to create good relationships between members of the club or team. We have already mentioned the powerful psychological pressures to which athletes can be subjected in unfamiliar environments, and especially in international events. But if you have a secure social platform - a feeling of solid ground underfoot - then there is a basic sense of security that can later determine who wins.

It cannot be emphasised enough how vitally important it is to create a sense of group security in all sports. This security will be mainly a result of the group climate that the coach is able to create. A great deal of work needs to be done in this important area. Technical sports in particular are affected, often decisively, by the coach's ability (or lack of it) to create a sense of security.

One factor that is often overlooked is the fact that athletes often experience insecurity in their private lives. Coaches should explain to them that their performance in sport is affected by such security. When basic security disappears, athletes become preoccupied with dangers and other negative things, whether real or imagined.

When athletes feel insecure, any concentration, self-confidence or sense of well being is pushed to the side of the mind. They begin to get involved in their own feelings instead of directing all their energy towards training or competing.

*Key words*

- Openness
- Acceptance
- Thoughtfulness
- Security
- Support

*Key phrases*

- People are socially very sensitive
- Security must be worked at; insecurity comes by itself
- Security creates a basis for all positive development of the personality
- Security is fundamental to self-confidence
- Everyone appears to be more secure than they feel
- Security comes when - among other things - one feels accepted as a person, no matter what happens

With the athlete's security in mind, coaches should remember that the athlete may have problems in seeing the difference between negative comments which are directed at him personally and those directed at his performance or technique. Security is endangered by negative comments which are used simply to boost one's own ego. Security is created by the systematic and open communication of acceptance. Security is created by social support and the feeling that one is allowed to make mistakes.

## **11.0 Self-Confidence**

### ***11.1 Self-Confidence Is Important***

In sports psychology, there is possibly no single factor of greater importance for the full exploitation of an athlete's or a team's resources than self-confidence. Normally, a maximum performance can only be achieved by athletes with complete self-confidence.

But neurotic reactions can also be used to spur on an athlete to give a maximum performance, particularly in strength sports, when he can discharge enormous amounts of energy to overcompensate for feelings of inferiority. Normally, an

individual must mobilise all the self-confidence he can find in order to produce a top performance. The environment is very important. If you feel accepted and completely supported, then this also means a lot.

Self-confidence is built, to a great degree, on subconscious imagery and reactions. Athletes and coaches often work with goals that can be moved about easily. It can be much harder to shake one's self-esteem. Coaches and athletes should be particularly interested in working with self-images, self-esteem and self-confidence. Such work can yield amazingly good results!

### ***11.2 Self-Confidence Can Take Many Forms***

A female pentathlete who is a good high jumper may feel weak in the throwing events. She is very self-confident in her favourite events but is much less confident when throwing. Self-confidence is the result of positive experiences in a given situation. If there are enough positive experiences in a certain situation, then self-confidence in that situation will be good.

But there are also certain athletes who have self-confidence almost built into their personalities, which can be used in almost any situation - a kind of basic self-confidence. Good self-confidence often goes hand-in-hand with good concentration.

Athletes with good self-confidence are more successful at keeping their nerves within reasonable limits. In this area of development, coaches or older friends have an important task in helping their younger colleagues to build positive experiences from their environment. During the crisis, when the athlete feels alone but in a position to break through and make a sensational win, the pressure will increase and his nerve control will be the deciding factor. An atmosphere of security built up from a number of positive experiences can tip the scales in the athlete's favour.

When you are working on objectives, a lot can be done to build up a solid basis of self-confidence, without which an athlete can't cope in a crisis situation. The coach, together with the athlete, can work out a whole series of smaller, intermediate goals which the athlete will be highly likely to achieve. When this happens, the coach should provide encouragement by positively acknowledging these achievements.

### ***11.3 Self-Confidence and Teamwork***

We have stressed the central role of the coach in the development of self-confidence. No less important is the role played by teammates in giving encouragement, support and help. It is of great importance that they believe in each other through and through. But this belief should extend further than just to the match or the situation at hand. The loyalty that they show should be of the kind that doesn't change with the score. No matter what the result of each competition, there should be an undercurrent of loyalty and support within the team.

***It is easier to believe in yourself if others believe in you.***

How is self-confidence created? As this question is of such supreme importance in sports, we have tried to examine it from many angles.

1. Make a distinction between the person and the performance. People usually link a performance to a particular performer. But we suggest the opposite approach: make a distinction between the person and his performance. There are a number of good reasons for this.

Among athletes, it is usual for their self-image and self-confidence, as well as their moods, to vary according to performance. If you compete successfully, then you are in a good mood and everything looks rosy. When the opposite happens - when there is trouble - then both mood and self-confidence slump. Then perhaps things go a little better - and straight away everything seems brighter again.

The person has then become a victim of his own performance. Our mental attitude is decided by how successful we are in our own sport. It is vital to gain control. So the kind of mood and self-confidence which bounces up and down depending upon performance can't be an ideal situation. Performance goes in waves - no matter how good the performer.

It is therefore vitally important to consider setting up a plan for personal development which makes a clear distinction between mood and performance. Training makes this possible - and the reason for doing it becomes clear when you realise how much more stable you become psychologically. The goal should be to gain control, instead of remaining a victim, of the circumstances. Perhaps this is not 100% possible in practice - but a lot can be done.

*Key phrases about self-confidence*

Self-confidence is:

- the most important single factor in developing potential.
- easy to feel - if you are supported by the environment.
- to a large degree dependent upon a sense of security.
- not just of one kind - there are many kinds of self-confidence.
- the sum of all the positive experiences in a certain situation.
- affected by nerves.
- something that a coach can develop in his athletes.
- something in which teammates can help each other.
- something that decides to a large degree how a team will perform.
- something that a coach should avoid building up for himself at the expense of the athletes.

*Key phrases when working on self-confidence*

- Help the athletes by setting them goals which they can probably achieve
- Make positive comments when the athlete achieve their objectives
- Break long-term objectives down into intermediate goals
- Make sure that the athlete feels "liked" and accepted
- Appreciate your athletes for who they are, instead of for what they do
- Create team spirit, mutual support and encouragement
- Avoid negative comments
- Create the social conditions that build up an athlete's self-confidence
- Protect the athlete from destructive criticism when things go badly

### **13.0 The Feeling of Freedom**

The feeling of being loose and free means a great deal to performance, particularly in technical sports. The opposite - the feeling of being tight and restricted - is common among athletes. The reason for this often lies in demands and expectations made by coaches, friends and the media. Such demands can have a negative effect and make athletes lose their sense of freedom.

It is also possible to restrict oneself by placing too many demands on one's own performance in such a way that one chokes that sense of freedom. And if you have a tendency not to accept yourself the result is often a feeling of stiffness and tightness.

An athlete whose thoughts are not dominated by demands and expectations can experience a sense of freedom while performing his sport. In addition, he doesn't use up so much mental energy before the actual competition.

### **14.0 Good Humour and Enjoyment**

It is obvious to many people that sport goes together with enjoyment of life. This is the way it should be. But because of the increasing demands for ever better performances, this connection is often lost. Many coaches have a tendency to equate sport with an over-serious attitude to life. This very often leads to a negative chain of development

The coach might reason like this: "We have been practising for this for a long time. So it's really nothing to joke about. Think of all the hard work we have put into it!"

Such an attitude can quickly lead to a mood of over-seriousness, so that everyone puts on a long face when talking about the competition.

Experience shows that athletes often give their best performances when they feel a sense of inner well being. They succeed more often when they are in a good mood. The coach must not forget laughter and fun as his team struggles to gain extra tenths of a second, extra inches and extra money.

Pleasure and humour are vital to the competitive spirit!

#### ***Suggestions for creating humour and pleasure***

It is possible for a coach to use good humour and pleasure as a form of stimulation, particularly during the practice leading up to competitions. In the midst of hard and heavy training, you can plan surprise breaks in the training routine, incorporating laughter and plenty of fun. You might use music, dance or a funny film or impromptu table tennis championships. Amusing quiz games can be easily organised.

#### ***Boring training makes bad learning.***

Over-seriousness and negative pep talks use up an athlete's energy. On the other hand, happiness and enjoyment create energy and thereby increase the possibilities for effective training.

We mentioned earlier that enjoyment creates arousal, and that this type of arousal is often much better from the point of view of performance than that brought on by, for example, nervousness and anxiety. If you can make something amusing, then you simply haven't the time to be nervous. It can also be said that happiness dispels unrest and fear. The brain can't process more than one kind of impulse at the same time.

### **15.0 Courage and Taking Risks**

Many athletes and coaches are so preoccupied with their own sense of security in all situations that they don't dare to take chances. When the people surrounding an athlete have a critical, negative view of his attempts to perform well, they also encourage him to develop defensive attitudes. He then goes for safety so to avoid criticism.

Critical coaches produce faint-hearted athletes.  
Positive coaches produce courageous athletes.

#### ***15.1 Recklessness***

There is a difference between active, healthy courage and that over-developed courage which might best be termed recklessness. You have to find the correct balance. There are football players who never dare to shoot, even when they have a good chance of scoring. Instead, they look for someone they can pass the ball to. Other players "shoot at everything that moves" and seem completely uninhibited. The player that the coach is really looking for is both loyal to the team and willing to take chances when they come. Many coaches would gain much by asking themselves, "How do I create loyal, courageous players?" The answer is perhaps by beginning to get rid of negative criticism.

Courageous, dependent athletes, who often have it in them to give fine performances if they only dared, need strong social support from coaches and friends in order to release this feeling of courage and strength.

#### ***15.2 The Need for Freedom from Responsibility***

One method that should be tried more often is for the coach to explain to the athletes that he shares responsibility with them, or that he assumes complete responsibility for them, or that he assumes complete responsibility for any poor results that may occur. Many athletes need all the help they can get with sharing responsibility. Yes, now and then, freedom from responsibility can be the correct medicine. If the coach tries to push the athlete into behaving more freely and courageously without taking all or part of the responsibility, then the outcome could be the complete opposite of what is intended. The reason for this is that the athlete often subconsciously refuses to accept a simple, logical reasoning that the coach is trying to impress upon him. Good performances are achieved by daring athletes with a desire to take risks.

#### ***Suggestions for action***

If the coach wishes to foster a new spirit and a fresher and more daring attitude, to stimulate courage free of worries about performance, it may be appropriate for him to assume responsibility for the athletes' performance during a transition period. The coach should explain his idea to his athletes such that he assumes complete responsibility for the change in strategy.

If the coach relieves the players of responsibility for a while, they often develop a more active, attacking attitude to the game. Thus the coach has released new, creative forces which give improved performance. At the same time, he is well aware of the risk of a backlash. But his role is to protect the athletes in every way, and to help them realise their own potential. Many athletes lose courage when the responsibility gets too heavy; this is something which is particularly true of team sports. At such a moment, in such a situation, they need their coach.

## **16.0 Motivation**

Why do we do various things? Because we want to is usually the answer. And why do we want to? Because we have a motive, a reason - we are motivated.

There are many different motives for taking part in sport: to become famous, to be best, to move around, to get into shape, to meet other people who are also interested in sport.

Mental energy is of great importance for motivation. Those who feel motivated find it easier to get keyed up. One of the most important tasks of the coach is to create motivation. This is an area where it certainly pays to put in work calculated to stimulate the athletes. Many coaches take it for granted that the athletes have the same motivation as they themselves have - and in this they are often wrong. The coach with insight understands that each athlete must be handled individually according to his character, talents and needs. If the training which is introduced doesn't fit the needs of the athlete, you can't expect him to be interested.

It is difficult to evaluate motivation, because an athlete's interest in training can vary from session to session. Factors that have nothing to do with training affect motivation and the level of energy.

In this area, it is difficult to give general recommendations because strength of motivation varies enormously from person to person. What can, however, be said with certainty is that the motivated athlete gets much more out of his training than does the passive, uninspired one. This applies particularly to training in technique and tactics. Even endurance and strength training seem to be affected by motivation.

### ***16.1 Evaluate by Studying Motivation***

Lack of motivation is often a sign that something is wrong, either in the leadership or in the team. Perhaps you are using a faulty method of training. Perhaps there are disagreements or conflicts in the team. Or perhaps the opportunity for social contacts is poor.

If athletes show a lack of motivation, you should then ask the question, "Is there something wrong with the environment or with the atmosphere?"

It is pretty useless to try and force athletes into being artificially motivated. Instead, you should analyse the environment and confer with the athletes to discover whether or not there are any obvious reasons for the lack of motivation. In far too many clubs there are conflicts and disagreements between members something that greatly reduces motivation.

It is wrong to put everyone in a team into the same mould. Coaches should understand that there are times when they have to consider making exceptions to the standard procedure. People are different. Motivation is a sensitive factor. And you notice quickly when something goes wrong.

Complaining and bad moods can also quickly cause a group to lose motivation. If such elements are allowed free rein, hatreds can soon develop. This can create discord between players or members. What begins as a petty disagreement over some trivial detail may soon develop into a genuine problem. The small problem that could probably have been solved easily can aggravate a host of other small problems which might normally have remained unnoticed.

It all goes to show that, even though an athlete or player takes up a sport mainly because he has an urgent need to perform, he also has social needs and a need for security that can't be ignored without paying the penalty.

What, then, can be done in a club to create or maintain motivation and enjoyment?

### ***Suggestions for the coach***

The reason for our particular choice of key phrases is this: motivation is deeply anchored in the personality, and it must be explained thoroughly in order to be understood.

1. The first key word is trust. The basis for this is frankness, honesty and fairness towards every single club member. Managers and coaches should consider each athlete as being independent and equal. For the sake of the spirit of the club, everyone should take everyone else quite seriously.
2. The management in particular should strive to create a feeling of togetherness. "If you are going to be on my team, then..." is an excellent way of killing an athlete's dreams of enjoyment and motivation, which are based to a great extent on his being able to participate in decisions and to take some responsibility himself.
3. The coach should ensure that there is variety in training by including new training methods and new places for training, and perhaps even sometimes including other activities or sports. The important thing is to banish monotonous, boring training.
4. During the planning of competition and training programs, care should be taken to ensure that the athletes can participate and have some influence, and that they are given the feeling that they have played their part in helping to make decisions. It is also important that an athlete's family is involved as closely as possible at this planning stage.

5. Everything that can be done should be done to make the athlete understand that he is considered to be a worthy member of the team. And all the team must accept the principle that in a democracy every opinion is equally valuable.
6. Openness and clear communication increase motivation in a group. You should be able to speak openly about everything in the group, including questions and problems of a psychological or social nature.
7. The group's meetings should be characterised by a positive spirit and positive thinking, as opposed to the kind of fake negotiations in which everything has already been worked out in detail behind closed doors.
8. Support, help and encouragement of teammates should be a self-evident part of their education and training. Individuals should learn not to further their own interests at the expense of those of their teammates.
9. The coach should try to include other elements in the training - for example, recreation and music. This applies particularly to training that can be boring, such as strength training, for instance. By introducing diversions between training sessions, such as enjoyable get-togethers, slide or film shows, matches on video followed by discussion, an instructional film, a dance or social event, the coach can encourage the athletes and give variety and rhythm to the training program. Such things increase motivation.
10. Coaches often handle all athletes in the same manner. The athlete would not be there if he hadn't been motivated for sport. But each person is different. This should never be forgotten. What one person can do easily, another person must train hard to learn.

It is poor leadership to try to use a conveyor-belt system when training athletes.

To summarise:

- Show trust and you will reap responsibility.
- The feeling of togetherness builds up a team.
- Variety promotes happiness.
- Planning helps avoid irritations.
- Openness creates motivation - back-room planning kills enjoyment.
- Support, help and encouragement should be the group's trademark.
- Create enjoyment during training - avoid monotony.
- Every person is unique - let each one be himself.
- Take time to speak with every member of the group.
- Try to have a good time together, inside and outside the training area.
- Let everyone participate in the decisions.
- Teach the athletes to encourage each other.

*Key phrases for team motivation*

- The degree of motivation in an athlete shows whether the training and environment are correct, or whether they need to be improved upon.
- Pleased and satisfied players are motivated players - a good subject for discussion in the club.
- Lack of motivation is often a product of excessive nervousness or over-defensiveness.
- Motivation is closely bound up with a sense of security and with good humour and enjoyment.

## **Developing Attentional Skills for Rowing**

*Author: Christopher Horsley (AUS)*

Coaches who ask rowers to "concentrate" are being as vague as if asking a rower to "row better." For athletes to learn and improve they need to be given specific information and work on specific skills - mental and physical.

Over the last 20 years, research psychologists have provided sport psychologists and coaches with a more specific definition of concentration. We have greater understanding of how we attend to information, process information and factors that can disrupt our attentional capabilities. This paper provides a basic explanation of attentional capabilities and details on how this knowledge may be applied to rowing. In particular, it identifies concentrational problems experienced by rowers and methods to develop concentration skills.

It is helpful to think of concentration in terms of attention. When concentrating, one is attending to information - potentially from a range of sources. When one concentrates effectively he or she attends to only those things that help to achieve goals. Concentration *lapses* are in fact a result of attending to irrelevant stimuli. Concentration is focusing on (attending to) the right things at the right time.

### **UNDERSTANDING ATTENTION**

Two concepts are most appropriate in understanding the attentional demands of rowing: limited capacity for processing and attentional style.

#### **Limited Processing Capacity**

Most coaches have experienced the "cocktail phenomenon" (1). At a party or meeting, the cocktail phenomenon occurs when one tries, unsuccessfully, to carry on two conversations simultaneously. Attempts are usually unsuccessful because of the limited capacity of sensory organs and brain (2, 8).

During the cocktail phenomenon, one is trying to attend simultaneously to two sources of information. Being aware of the topic of both conversations is possible; being actively involved in both is not. One tends to become overloaded and unable to cope with extra information.

Our sensory organs and brain function like a funnel used to pour liquid into a small hole. They limit the flow of information. Too much information and there is overload. By controlling the flow of information coming from the sensory organs, one helps to process the information more effectively (2).

Not only is there limited attentional capacity, but also a limited short-term memory. Information in short-term memory is stored for only 20-30 seconds (7). New information is held in short-term memory before processing it further into long-

term memory. Without processing, the information is lost. Time is needed for that processing to occur.

Another limiting factor is the quantity of information the short-term memory can hold. Short-term memory capacity is limited to between five and six bits of information. That is why it is difficult to remember telephone numbers of more than seven integers without rehearsal (5).

Anxiety is known to negatively affect processing capacity. Although optimal arousal heightens processing capabilities, anxiety diminishes the ability to attend to, and process, information (9).

Our skill levels also affect processing capacity. The more skilled, the greater the volume of relevant information that can be processed (9). As skill develops in a specific area, more task-relevant information is able to be processed. The process is known as chunking. Notice the difference when discussing the technical skills of rowing with a novice as compared with an experienced international rower. Because of stored knowledge, or schemas, the experienced rower is able to attend to and process greater amounts of information than the novice.

### **Implications for Coaching Style**

- Avoid giving too much new information at one time. The short-term memory will quickly become overloaded. Any new information after overload results in wasted words. Athletes will become confused or forget all but the first and last bits of information. Give one instruction and let the rowers apply it before you introduce another.
- Do not overload rowers with instructions or cues on which to focus. For example, do not ask them to simultaneously focus on the catch, leg drive, head position and power. One cue at a time; two, if they are desperate. Remember the objective is to automate technique. There should be no need to focus on all aspects of technique.
- If giving a number of instructions, summarize at the end. A summary is an effective way to transfer information from the short-term memory to long term storage.
- Pause when talking. It gives the rowers a chance to process the information.
- Learn to recognize signs of information overload or anxiety. Adjust your instructions to avoid both. For example, slow down your rate of speech.
- Give the rowers a chance to think for themselves. Ask questions and let them evaluate their pieces before you comment.
- Provide the rower with an awareness of the most important cues. For example, during a steady state session have rowers focus on specific cues for 10 minutes at a time. Success is determined not only on successful implementation of the skill but also on how effectively they can keep their minds focused on the cue.
- Give the rower ample practice concentrating on the most relevant cues.

In summary, concentration is affected by limited attentional capacity. Sense organs can take in only a limited amount of information, processing capacity is limited, short-term memory is limited in both duration and quantity, and anxiety limits attentional and processing capacity. However, as skill develops, attentional and processing capacity increase.

### **Nideffer's Test of Attentional and Interpersonal Style**

Nideffer's concept of attention, and his Test of Attentional & Interpersonal Style, has been successfully applied in sport (6).

He identified four dimensions of attention:

*External* - all information derived from outside of the body, e.g., the sound of the oars entering the water or a coach's view of a crew training.

*Internal* - all information to be derived within the mind and body, e.g., the feel of a powerful leg drive, or thoughts.

*Narrow* - information derived from a limited source, e.g., focusing only on the catch or focusing in the boat, ignoring other crews.

*Broad* - being aware of information from a range of sources, e.g., at the start of a race being simultaneously aware of boat feel, body position and the starter.

Further, the above four dimensions can be combined:

*Broad-external focus of attention* - Athletes good in this area are able to effectively integrate lots of external information at the same time. They know what is going on around them (e.g., they are able to spot the open teammate in team sports, they have what the police call a "street sense").

*Narrow-external focus of attention* - This refers to the skill that allows focus on a limited amount of external information. Athletes good in this area can sustain concentration on one item or person. Examples in rowing include focusing on the head of the person in front, the calls of the coxswain, the timing of the stroke, and feel of the boat.

*Broad-internal focus of attention* - This refers to a skill often exhibited by coaches of team sports where they have to effectively integrate information and ideas from several different areas. For example, the basketball coach must integrate information about team tactics, player performance, score, time remaining, mood of bench players and so on before he makes a decision.

*Narrow-internal focus of attention* - This is the skill which facilitates focus on a limited number of internal cues such as thoughts and body. In rowing this may include muscle tension in the shoulders, feel of the oar and thoughts.

Each individual has an identifiable and enduring attentional strength, but we all are different. Some athletes are particularly effective at focusing on a limited number of internal cues while others are more effective at integrating lots of external information. Some people use all types of attentional styles effectively.

Most people exhibit attentional flexibility, the skill to change their attentional style to meet the demands of the situation. The skill of concentration is to match attentional style with the attentional demands of the situation.

### **Attentional Demands of Rowing**

Based on Nideffer's model, the attentional demands for rowing involve a combination of narrow-internal focus of attention and narrow-external focus of attention. Characteristics of a narrow-internal focus when racing include awareness of lactate build-up; muscle tension in shoulders, hands and face; breathing control; focus on positive task-related thoughts; awareness of technique.

Characteristics of narrow-external focus when racing include awareness of the coxswain and instructions; awareness of the starter; the boat and water; teammates; and a hazy awareness of other crews.

### **Factors That Negatively Affect Concentration In Rowing**

*Mismatch* - Under normal circumstances we use our attentional strengths to our advantage. Under abnormal circumstances, such as pressure-induced anxiety, we often subconsciously return to our attentional strengths. That is beneficial if our attentional style matches the attentional strengths of the situation but falls down if there is a mismatch.

For example, a rower who is particularly good at integrating lots of external information may find himself distracted at the start of the race by other crews warming up. Instead of a narrow focus, his anxiety levels force him to his strengths and he keeps broadening his focus. He has a mismatch.

*External Distractions* - Another effect of increasing anxiety is to overload our attentional capacity. External overload results from taking in too much information, from attempting to concentrate on too many external things at once.

Problems occur when rowers are distracted by irrelevant external information. Examples include comments made by other people, activities on the bank before the start of a race, other crews during a race, calls from opposing coxswains.

Rowers need to have well-practiced strategies that can be employed to keep their minds focused.

*Internal Overload* - A common problem for most athletes is "being caught inside one's head" or thinking too much. The source of the problem is usually anxiety.

Skilled performance occurs when one operates on automatic, with as little thinking as possible. All the training and mental preparation is aimed at allowing the rower to slot into this mode. When racing, there should be a limited number of cues that need to be monitored. Unfortunately for some rowers, their minds race and they become distracted.

Rowers need to practice calming their minds and develop strategies to focus on appropriate cues. Techniques rowers have used include focusing on their

shoelaces, the feel of the oar in their hands and the sound of the boat moving in the water. The particular focus is not as important as the process to change their focus from internal to external.

*Narrow and Internal Focus* - In cases where anxiety is extremely high, most people involuntarily narrow their attention, finally turning inwards. They become momentarily obsessed with the overpowering feeling of anxiety, to the extent that what is occurring in the mind and body dominates their attention. Whether it be mismatch, overload, or narrowing, rowers benefit by developing anxiety control skills and strategies to focus on those cues that are important.

*Not Knowing the Job* - A number of rowers are not sure of what they should be focusing on during various stages of their preparation and racing. In effect, they do not know their jobs. A handy exercise for a coach is to be continually asking his or her rowers, "What is the best thing for you to focus on at this stage of your race (preparation)?" Sometimes a coach can advise rowers on the best thing. But by questioning, he or she is encouraging the rower to accept responsibility and make decisions. By having them think and decide what is the best focus, the coach is helping them to reduce uncertainty and become more aware of specifics involved in their jobs.

*Lack of Attentional Skill* - Effective concentration is as much a skill as physical technique. All athletes have the ability to concentrate, however, not all are skilled. Becoming skilled requires disciplined practice. There are many drills rowers can practice on and off the water to improve their attentional skills.

*Lack of Discipline* - It requires discipline to keep the mind focused. Undisciplined minds jump to the most potent stimuli. Disciplined minds resist powerful distractions and focus on those factors that best help performance. It is of little use exhorting rowers to concentrate or exhibit mental discipline. They must practice focusing on specific cues. And after training, their attempts should be evaluated.

## **Methods of Development**

*Personal Skill Development* - There are a number of skills rowers can develop to help maintain concentration. Initially they need to become self-aware, understand their attentional strengths and weaknesses, become sensitive to situations when they are likely to be distracted, and understand their emotional reactions and prominent thoughts.

They need to develop an effective short-term method of calming the mind and relaxing the body. Centering is a popular technique (3). Rowers need to develop a range of strategies that can be used to shift attentional focus. Finally rowers need to develop routines or habitual ways of behaving in certain situations.

*Training methods* - A number of measures can be implemented on and off the water to help rowers develop attentional skills. These include writing out a concentration plan for the pre-competition period and the race. Off-water concentration training drills can be incorporated with weight training or as separate sessions. On-water concentration drills can complement physical work.

Providing the rower with questions about the level of attentional intensity and direction of focus helps to develop an awareness.

### **Summary**

Effective concentration is a skill. To help rowers develop concentration skills coaches need to understand the concept and the attentional demands of rowing. They also need to be aware of factors that interfere with effective concentration and common problems experienced by rowers.

Coaches then need to incorporate concentration exercises into off and on-water training. Concentration skills can be developed in the weight room, in the boat or at specific in-house sessions.

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