

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS AFFECTING SPORTS PERFORMANCE AND THEIR MANAGEMENT FOR BETTER PERFORMANCE

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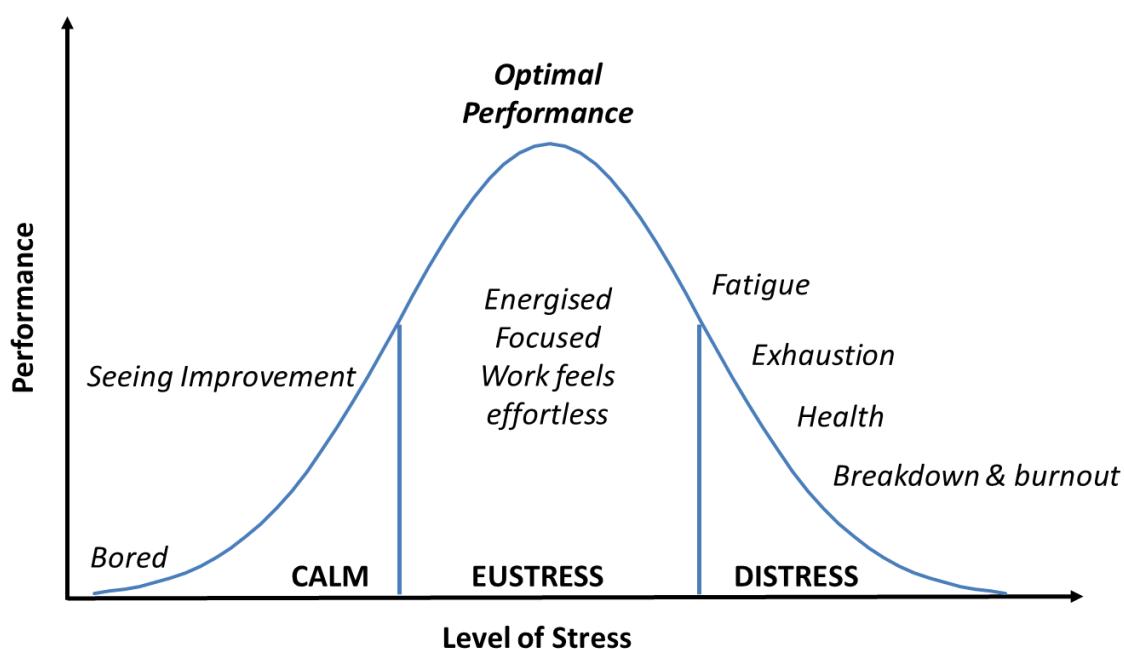
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Introduction:

Training the mind, as well as the body, is increasingly being recognised as vital to achieving sporting success. Understanding how to apply psychology in sport can help improve an athlete's motivation and ultimately their performance. Both sport psychology (focusing on the dynamic interplay between psychological factors and athletic performance) and sport and exercise psychology (focusing on using psychological insight to increase exercise and activity levels) are essential components in empowering performance. Whether that be for professional athletes or the general population, an understanding of how the mind works can have a huge impact. There are many psychological factors that affect sports performance, this paper would examine a few of them.

Stress

Stress is often described as a feeling of being overwhelmed, worried or run-down. Stress can affect people of all ages, genders and circumstances and can lead to both physical and psychological health issues. By definition, stress is any uncomfortable "emotional experience accompanied by predictable biochemical, physiological and behavioral changes."¹ Some stress can be beneficial at times, producing a boost that provides the drive and energy to help people get through situations like exams or work deadlines. The relationship between stress and performance has been portrayed by the stress response curve created by Nixon P. in 1979. In addition, pressure, an important stressor, has also a crucial influence on an individual's response to stress. One of the most noticeable effects of stress in one's life is the changes in his performance. While we can easily recognize the consequences of normal or excessive amounts of stress through mere observation, it's best to learn about the scientific relationship between stress and performance. The curve shows that as the level of stress increases, the performance level also increases, to the point of eustress, or healthy tension. Near the point of fatigue, an identified area called the Comfort Zone indicates the range of stress levels that we can absolutely manage and facilitates good performance levels. As stress begins to be perceived as overwhelming or excessive, the person reaches a fatigue point wherein the performance levels starts to decline. The ultimate end of overwhelming stress, called burnout, can be exhaustion, ill health or breakdown.



Anxiety

Anxiety means a disturbed state of mind, emotional reactivity; arousal; nervousness; and unrealistic and unpleasant state of mind. Anxiety is an essential ingredient of any competitive situation and without certain level of anxiety, there cannot be competitive performance. Neither too high, nor too low level of anxiety is conducive to sports performance. Adequate level of anxiety produces best results. Anxiety has both psychological and physiological implications in sport performance. For example, once aroused, it raises the general arousal level of the player to such an extent that he finds it hard to concentrate on his game due to constant bombardment on his nervous system and his inability to diffuse tension caused by rising anxiety level. The ability of the player to monitor and judge situations correctly is reduced. His information-processing mechanism gets over stressed resulting either in wrong or slow response even to emergent situations. Under such a condition, the player is not focused-he wishes to do on thing but does something else. He loses control over his body and mind. The relationship between anxiety and athletic performance has been a subject of various theories sprung up from time; for example drive theory in 1943, and inverted U-hypothesis or optimal arousal level in 1962. The latter was formed on the notion that there is an optimal amount of arousal that an athlete will perform at. However, if that level of arousal is passed then the level of performance will decrease. The same thing happens when the level of arousal is lower than the optimal level. Though this hypothesis has had much support for many years, it too has fallen out of favour due to its oversimplification on a subject as complex as brain and behavior.

Aggression

Aggression, in its broadest sense, is behaviour, or a disposition, that is forceful, hostile or attacking. It may occur either in retaliation or without provocation. In narrower definitions that are used in social and behavioural sciences, aggression is an intention to cause harm or an act intended to increase relative social dominance. Predatory or defensive behaviour between members of different species may not be considered aggression in the same sense. Aggression can take a variety of forms and can be physical or be communicated verbally or non-verbally. Aggression differs from what is commonly called assertiveness, although the terms are often used interchangeably among laypeople, e.g. an aggressive salesperson. Aggression is defined as threats or harmful actions directed toward another individual and can include threat displays, lunging, growling, snarling snapping and biting. In animals, aggressive behaviors are a means of communication. Dogs and cats use aggressive displays, threats and attacks to resolve competitive disputes over resources (territory, food) or to increase their reproductive potential, or to escape threatening situations. "Aggression" describes the behavior, but does not give any information about underlying motives or causes.

High-performance athletes claim that 90% of their success comes from mental training and ability. In professional sports, there aren't huge differences between athletes in terms of potential, training, or physical ability. The determining factors of success, therefore, lie in the psychological realm.

Over the years, we've seen increased interest in the psychological aspect of sports. It's clear that mental factors affect sports performance. This is true for elite athletes as well as anyone participating in sports. Today we have evidence to back up this idea. People practicing any physical sport, whether they're professionals or amateurs, can benefit from developing certain psychological tools. The tools can help increase their capacity and sport performance.

The psychological factors of sports and exercise that most affect performance are: self-confidence, motivation, emotional control, and concentration.

- Motivation: This is important for any area you want to optimize your performance in. It is especially important in sports. Think about athletes who experience constant ups-and-downs, wins and losses. In their case, intrinsic motivation and love for what they do is usually what helps them recover after a bad pass, a terrible throw, or a much lower score than they were expecting.
- Concentration: Athletes also need to have the ability to concentrate intensely. All actions, even the most simple or intuitive ones, require concentration. A poorly executed move can result in a loss or an injury. It can ruin months of preparation. That's why even an athlete with mediocre training is not usually distracted.
- Emotional control: Doing mental training exercises that help you control your emotions and doubts can make the difference between success and failure. When poor emotional control affects an athlete's performance, it is usually because she let her emotions affect her concentration.
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Mental techniques for improving sports performance

Being a professional athlete involves a high degree of emotional involvement. First, athletes have to identify and analyze their strengths and weaknesses. Then they can use personalized techniques to enhance performance and confidence. If they're not personalized, then they could be counterproductive.

The techniques that athletes use the most to enhance their performance are:

- Attention control: both internal and external attention. Internal attention is when an athlete focuses on things happening in her own body (thoughts, internal dialogue, feelings, and movements). External attention is when an athlete focuses on things outside of her own body.
- Setting goals: this helps athletes get an overall vision of the work they have to do. They can also visualize what they have to achieve to get to their final goals.
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For managing or controlling stress, anxiety, tension and aggression a variety of coping skills, strategies and intervention techniques such as behavioral modification, positive reinforcement, mental imagery, visualization, relaxation, cognitive strategies, muscular and mental relaxation, behavioral modification, visualization, Zen meditation, positive self talk, etc.

Finally, it's important to remember that sports (especially high-level sports) involve a lot of pain and suffering. And it's not just the pain that the exercise itself produces, but everything that comes from it indirectly too.

As a result, sports are powerful teachers of resilience. Many of the psychological techniques that athletes use are ones we can use in other highly competitive and highly demanding contexts

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