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Combining counseling and coaching techniques to achieve optimal performance of high school students

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Combining counseling and coaching techniques to achieve optimal performance of high school students

Abstract

A longstanding question in sports psychology research has been whether a given amount of cognitive practice and preparation [sic] to perform a motor skill will enhance performance (Ravizza, 1982). This research has recently shown that there is an optimal level of arousal that maximizes performance at any level and that this level of arousal depends on the nature and complexity of the task, as well as individual differences (Weinberg, 1983). Sports psychology has thus evolved to focus on teaching individuals the importance of recognizing the need and the skills to gain control and attain an optimal level of arousal. Once individuals have learned their skills, their performance levels will improve (Ravizza, 1981).

COMBINING COUNSELING AND COACHING TECHNIQUES TO ACHIEVE
OPTIMAL PERFORMANCE OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Chapter One

Introduction

A longstanding question in sports psychology research has been whether a given amount of cognitive practice and preparation to perform a motor skill will enhance performance (Ravizza, 1982). This research has recently shown that there is an optimal level of arousal that maximizes performance at any level and that this level of arousal depends on the nature and complexity of the task, as well as individual differences (Weinberg, 1983). Sports psychology has thus evolved to focus on teaching individuals the importance of recognizing the need and the skills to gain control and attain an optimal level of arousal. Once individuals have learned their skills, their performance levels will improve (Ravizza, 1981).

Until recently, psychology has rarely been practiced in the United States due to the relationship and identification with psychotherapy. Coaches and athletes believed that teaching psychological skills to athletes inferred that they had emotional problems (Harris, 1984). The bias was that psychologists are people who provide help only to those who are disturbed or maladjusted. They did not, until recently, consider how the teaching

of certain skills to athletes could improve their performance. Research has now determined that athletes who use the various cognitive skills and strategies advocated by sports psychology have improved their performance. These cognitive skills are teachable and are appropriate for coaches and athletes to incorporate into practice and competition (Harris & Harris, 1984).

Eastern European countries have been utilizing these cognitive skills with success for the last several decades. Coaches in these countries are often trained in psychological strategies and techniques which they incorporate into regular training programs for their athletes. Soviet athletes devote approximately 75 percent of their final training prior to a competition to the psychological factors and practice the physical skills only enough to maintain their level of performance (Harris & Harris , 1984). In the United States, most athletes report that they try to get themselves emotionally ready prior to competition, which presumably means they are trying to reach their optimal level of arousal (Weinberg, 1983). In addition to preparing for competition, athletes stress that it is important to maintain and regulate this optimal arousal level throughout the length of competition (Weinberg, 1983).

Coaches, athletes, sports psychologists, and counselors acknowledge the important role that cognitive skills play in achieving high levels of performance.

High school counselors can provide an important service to student athletes by teaching them the cognitive skills necessary to improve their performance in all areas of the curriculum. Each individual's need for developing a positive self concept and expanding self esteem can be facilitated by utilizing the counselor's leadership and guidance (Bunker, 1981).

The main objective of this paper is to apply sports psychology procedures to the high school counseling curriculum. This application is appropriate since many student athletes are pressured to perform to the best of their ability at all times. These pressures may come from within the athlete or from the environment. Internal factors which contribute to the pressure experienced by the student athlete include affiliating with a team, developing new skills, placing importance on success, feeling important, gaining recognition, and obtaining rewards (Passer, 1982). The literature stresses the point that environmental pressures stem from the excessive emphasis placed on winning (Passer, 1982). For example, Scanlan and Passer (1980a, 1980b) found that 91% of male

participants and 94% of female participants they studied believed that winning was very important; even higher percentages were obtained for ratings on the importance of performing well individually (Passer, 1982). In a survey of Little and Middle League Baseball players (Skubic, 1956), 87% of the respondents indicated that winning meant a great deal to them and 80% stated that they felt very bad when they played a poor game (Passer, 1982). Even though the research is clear that young athletes and parents have placed considerable emphasis on success, findings have not pinpointed why this is the case (Passer, 1982).

Research indicates that performing poorly or losing a contest does have an adverse impact on individuals (Passer, 1982). As a consequence, young athletes often develop a poor self concept and/or high anxiety levels. A study by Simon and Marlens (1979) shows that anxiety affects students differently in different activity areas. Various school activities ranked in the following order: band solos, wrestling, gymnastics, basketball, and school tests (Passer, 1982). This information is evidence that competitive pressures are as significant as those encountered in the classroom and other non-athletic situations.

It follows that high school counselors should consider the use of preventative approach to help students recognize and deal with the anxiety and competitive pressures which occur within the school environment. Sport psychology techniques offer counselors proven preventative procedures. Sport psychologists have helped their clients deal with competitive stress and thus, enhance performance by utilizing such mental skills as goal setting, mental imagery, and attentional focusing (Ravizza, 1984). School counselors can also employ these procedures to help athletes manage anxiety and maximize performance. Students can generalize these mental skills to increase concentration, relaxation, academic studies, and to gain a greater sense of control.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the impact of using mental skills in reaching peak performances and how high school counselors can use these procedures to enhance student achievement and athletic performance. There are five basic forms of mental preparation which will be discussed. The five strategies are as follows: (a) attentional focus, which involves an individual's ability to attend to what is going on, how well an individual can attend, and how long that individual can

continue to attend; (b) self-talk, which involves enhancing and reinforcing self-confidence before athletic performance through positive self-statements; (c) relaxation, which involves reducing or suspending muscular activity in the voluntary muscles; (d) mental imagery, which involves recalling experiences and reshaping them into a meaningful reverie via a thought process; and (e) preparatory arousal, which involves becoming excited and/or aroused just prior to performance.

Chapter Two

Cognitive skills and mental preparation can be an asset for junior high and high school students who experience stress and anxiety in academic and athletic situations. Counselors who help students develop strategies to cope more effectively with the stress and anxiety in athletic competition will be offering students skills which can help them for a lifetime in a wide variety of situations.

Attentional Focus

The most important cognitive skill is the ability to focus one's attention on proper environmental cues and to maintain that concentration over the course of the game or event (Weinberg, 1983). When athletes enjoy what they are doing, they report specific changes in their attentional processing. Specifically, they narrow their attention so that it is focused exclusively on the task at hand (Harris & Harris, 1984). Focused attention is the prerequisite for working at the peak of one's capacity.

Maximal performance occurs when intense concentration of attention is focused on a limited stimulus field. The individual must be able to select cues which are important

and focus solely on them (Harris & Harris, 1984). The challenge of the situation must match the individual's perceived ability in order for concentration to be maintained throughout the execution. Despite the importance of concentration and effective attentional focus for performance, little research has been conducted in these areas. Nideffer (1976), however, has recently provided a theoretical framework which promises to help both researchers and coaches understand the role of attention in performance. Nideffer argues that to teach and coach effectively, the physical educator and coach must be able to define the attentional demands of a particular setting so that the proper attentional focus can be identified (Weinberg, 1983). Nideffer suggests that individuals have different attentional styles and specific situations require certain styles or certain amounts of flexibility. For example, a golfer might generally require a narrow external focus on the ball, whereas a quarterback going back to pass might require a broad external focus to survey the defensive backfield and pick out primary and secondary receivers (Weinberg, 1983). Nideffer points out that mental mistakes often occur when an individual focuses on inappropriate attentional cues. For example, a basketball player

shooting free throws should focus his or her attention on the rim rather than the noise of a crowd (Weinberg, 1983).

Since many mental mistakes can be attributed to an inappropriate focus of attention, coaches, educators, and counselors need to be aware to the demands of their activity and the attentional styles of the individual (Ravizza, 1984). Coaches should also attempt to reduce the anxiety inherent in many learning and competitive situations. Reduced levels of anxiety will aid in focusing on cues relevant to the activity (Weinberg, 1983). Research done by Nideffer (1976) on teaching new skills and the anxiety associated with this process showed that the learner usually is watched by others. This often increases anxiety because the learner does not want to fail in front of their peers. As the learner focuses more and more on failing, he/she is prevented from fully attending to task demands (Weinberg, 1983). If the learner can instead be placed in a situation where social evaluation is minimal, the individual will have a better opportunity to focus on the task rather than the consequences of their behavior (Weinberg, 1983). The difference between the best performance and the worst performance lies within the ability to concentrate, to

shift attentional focus and to disregard irrelevant ones.

Self Talk

Self-talk is another mental preparation strategy. Individuals talk to themselves in an attempt to enhance and reinforce self-confidence before athletic performance through positive self-statements (Harris & Harris, 1983). Bandura (1976) presents a theory of self-talk which asserts that behavioral change is mediated by a cognitive mechanism called self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as the strength of one's conviction that he or she can successfully execute a behavior required to produce a certain outcome. If an individual is capable of a response and there are appropriate incentives for performance, then actual performance can be predicted by the individual's belief in personal competence (Bandura, 1977). Nelson and Furst (1972) investigated the effects of confidence and expectations on performance. They tested male subjects for arm strength and asked them to estimate their strength relative to their peers. Subjects were then paired so that one was clearly stronger than the other, but both believed the stronger subject to be weaker. The results revealed that the objectively weaker subject won arm wrestling competition 83% of the time.

It appears that if an individual expects to win, it is likely that the individual will perform at a higher level. It was also found that an individual's pre-existing feelings of efficacy can be modified by the performance in specific situations (Harris, 1984). In essence, this implies that the coach or counselor can alter an athlete's level of confidence by the kind of information that is provided or by structuring the environment to create positive expectations of success (Weinberg, 1983).

Mahoney (1979) presents the following suggestions for augmenting the self-efficacy perceptions of individuals: (1) response induction aids, introducing devices that may reduce the perceived discrepancy between the athlete's current and desired performance; (2) modeling, having the individual observe another individual successfully executing the skill; (3) self-efficacy statement, having an athlete practice saying positive statements to themselves prior to performance to enhance self-confidence; (4) imagery, having the individual imagine themselves performing the desired response prior to competition as if reviewing a movie in their mind of that desired response; (5) verbal persuasion, reassuring and encouraging the individual that they are capable of performing the desired response to reinforce

their self-confidence; and (6) performance accomplishments, structuring the environment to create a successful experience by focusing on cues which will enhance performance, encourage arousal, and avoid focusing solely on the outcome of an event without considering the process or level of performance exhibited.

An important consideration for counselors and coaches who attempt to employ these strategies is the discrepancy between the athlete's present performance level and the desired performance level. In order to build confidence, the individual should be asked only to make slight improvements (Weinberg, 1983). Short-term, realistic goals that are readily attainable will enhance the development of confidence. Consequently, the counselor must be sensitive to the athlete's performance capabilities as well as helping the athlete build the belief in his/her own capabilities. This is a major contribution that the counselor or coach can make to an athlete's development (Weinberg, 1983).

Relaxation

The mental preparation strategy of relaxation has received much attention in the sports psychology field. Counselors and coaches are becoming increasingly aware of the stress created by competitive situations. They are

also realizing that increased levels of anxiety may undermine performance by causing increased levels of anxiety, tension, nausea, inappropriate focus of attention, and decreased psychological flexibility (Weinberg, 1983). Relaxation training contributes to enhanced performance in four ways: it proves physiological benefits, aids in the management of performance stress, is an important prelude to guarded imagery, and facilitates self-awareness and skill development (Ravizza, 1983).

There are three primary techniques used to produce muscle relaxation: progressive muscle relaxation, biofeedback, and transcendental meditation. The best known technique is Jacobson's (1983) Progressive Relaxation. Jacobson proposed that muscular tension and relaxation are incompatible physiological states. In order to relax, subjects first learn to distinguish between tension and relaxation. They then are taught to progressively tense and relax all major muscle groups in the body, sensitizing them to proprioceptive feedback from these muscles (Weinberg, 1983). Biofeedback involves receiving physiological feedback via a visual or auditory signal that indicates the individual's present state of tension. This helps athletes recognize when they are tense, observe the cause of tension, and develop

techniques to reduce the tension (Harris, 1984).

Transcendental meditation, the final procedure to be described, requires four factors to achieve relaxation. These factors are: (a) quiet environment, (b) a passive attitude, (c) a mental device - this is similar to a "mantra" and involves the repetition of a one syllable word such as "one", and (d) a comfortable position. This technique should be practiced twice a day for 20 minutes. The aim of this technique is to achieve the relaxation response, which decreases the sympathetic nervous system activity and is characterized by lowering blood pressure, heart rate, respiration rate, oxygen consumption, and muscle tension (Benson, 1975).

Although these relaxation techniques produce physiological changes, performance results have been equivocal, with some studies reporting positive performance changes (Bell, 1976; Bennett, 1978; Titley, 1976) and others reporting no performance effects (Bennett & Stothart, 1980; Williams, 1978b). More research is needed to determine the effectiveness of relaxation techniques in enhancing performance (Weinberg, 1983). These techniques do appear to offer a mechanism for helping athletes who exhibit a high level of precompetitive stress. Relaxation induces feelings of

calm, self-control, and appropriate focus of attention. These mental states help athletes realize more of their potential as well as experience more personal enjoyment from their participation (Ravizza, 1983).

Mental Imagery

Many athletes have reported they try to picture themselves going through an actual movement prior to performance (Weinberg, 1983). For example, Jack Nicklaus states that he never hits a golf ball without developing an image of himself hitting the ball first. He further describes his shots as 10% swing, 40% set up and stance, and 50% mental picture (Nicklaus, 1974). High jumpers Dwight Stone and Dick Fosbury have also reported that prior to jumping, they visualize themselves running every step up to the bar and then clearing the bar (Harris, 1984).

The relationship between mental imagery and performance appear to have sound backings in the psychological literature. Many researchers (Mahoney, 1974; Meichenbaum, 1977) have developed procedures such as covert self-instruction and stress inoculation training. These techniques operate on the basic premise that a person's thoughts and images significantly influence their subsequent behaviors. As indicated by Silva (1982), virtually all cognitive behavior-modification

theories emphasize that regular improper conditioning can result in undesirable overt behavior. In essence, these researchers have argued that overt behaviors can change by altering covert behaviors. Additionally, research has indicated that when an individual imagines a movement, actual muscular activity is produced (Jacobson, 1930). In a sense, then, mental imagery gets the musculature into action and can prepare an athlete for the actual physical competition (Weinberg, 1983). Although over 50 studies have investigated the effectiveness of imagery on performance, there is a lack of consistent results. A cautious interpretation of the literature is offered by Arbin (1972), who states, "there seems to be little doubt that mental practice can positively affect skilled motor performance when practice conditions are optimal. It is equally clear, however, that mental practice is not always an aid to performance" (Weinberg, p. 153).

Imagery can utilize two distinctive processes, internal and external imagery. Internal imagery involves seeing or feeling an activity from the performer's own perspective. An example of internal imagery comes from olympic gymnast Karen Schuckman's statement during the 1976 qualifying rounds: "I see what I would see if I was

actually doing it, therefore I have the memory of what it feels like," (Weinberg, p. 153). External imagery occurs when persons view themselves from the perspective of an external observer, much like a movie. For example, tennis players may see their whole body, the ball, or the opponent as if watching the match from the spectator's point of view.

There are a variety of factors which influence the success of mental imagery. The primary factor for mental imagery working or not working is athlete's ability to vividly imagine themselves executing the desired behavior (Orlick, 1980). Another variable which appears important is the individuals ability to conceptualize or see the task, like a film running through their head. Research has shown that the vividness and controllability of the image are significant factors in determining the effectiveness of imagery (Silva, 1980). Controllability refers to whether the image changes according to an athlete's intention. For example, a high jumper reported hitting the bar everytime he tried to visualize a successful jump (Silva, 1980). An appropriate procedure would require that the high jumper re-visualize the experience until he could develop the image of a successful experience. There also seems to be a great deal of

variation in athletic ability to get a clear image. It may be necessary to teach some individuals how to get a controllable vivid image in order for that individual to conceptualize a properly executed performance. Once these conditions are established, they can then see themselves doing the activity correctly. A final factor which mediates the effectiveness of imagery in enhancing performance is the individual's skill level. Although some discrepancy exists in the literature, there seems to be a consensus that imagery will not enhance performance unless the individual has some prior practice at the task (Weinberg, 1983). There is also some evidence that skilled athletes may benefit more from imagery than athletes of less skill, although more research is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn (Corbin, 1967; Noel, 1980). In order for imagery to be effective, it is essential that the individuals clearly see themselves and feel themselves correctly executing the skill (Orlick, 1980).

Imagery can also be used to practice coping strategies. Individuals can attempt to see themselves setting goals, achieving goals, reinforcing themselves by saying supportive things to themselves, relaxing just before a big event, and overcoming critical points in a game. By

overcoming these obstacles, the athlete can concentrate more on their performance rather than obstacles which may discourage performance.

The following are basic guidelines for using imagery as part of an individual's training regimen. Choose a place where there are no distractions. Try to use all sense modalities when imagining. The individual must see the desired movements, feel the movements, and hear the sounds common to the situation. Next, focus should be placed on performing the skill perfectly. Include imagery systematically into the workout regimen. Use imagery to rehearse and learn different strategies that might be used during an activity. Employ relaxation procedures before using imagery. The individual should be in a state of relaxed concentration when involved in imagery activities. Practice controlling images until desired images can be produced on demand. And finally, try to develop clear and vivid images in order to achieve a precise picture of the behaviors to be performed (Weinberg, 1983).

Preparatory Arousal

Preparatory arousal is the process of getting ready mentally and physically prior to performance. Based on the experiences of athletes, research has described a

pattern of arousal and performance. This pattern involves learning to become aware of one's own responses and to assume responsibility for controlling them (Harris, 1984). Individuals with a sense of power and control are able to reinforce their self-confidence and security in their ability to handle whatever occurs. While relatively little is known about arousal strategies, most coaches and athletes believe that an athlete is not ready to perform unless he/she is excited, hyperactive, or controllably nervous (Harris, 1984).

The amount of arousal needed is highly individualized. Recent studies and self-reports from athletes suggest that most athletes experience high levels of pre-competitive anxiety (Harris, 1984). Many of these athletes, despite high levels of anxiety, perform exceptionally well and consistently close to their potential. As a result of these findings, it has been concluded that it is not the absence of anxiety that leads to consistent performance. Instead, it appears that the determining factor is how the athlete perceives their increasing anxiety prior to performance and how they channel the energy that their anxiety generates (Harris, 1984). Becoming more aware of individual responses and the condition under which they occur can help athletes accept this as part of the

readiness process and he is more likely to demonstrate consistently good performance.

In investigations by Weinberg, Gould, and Jackson (1980) and Gould, Weinberg and Jackson (1981), subjects performed an isokinetic leg-strength task using a number of different mental preparation strategies. Results consistently indicated that preparatory arousal produced superior performance to both control conditions as well as other mental preparation strategies. It appears that for strength tasks, preparatory arousal is indeed effective in enhancing performance and might be appropriate for athletes such as weightlifters (Weinberg, 1983).

The literature presents the following approach for helping individuals reach their optimal level of arousal:

- (1) Reflect on past performances to determine if the individual's arousal level was too high or too low;
- (2) Learn which factors affect the individual when performing;
- (3) Understand and define the athletes competitive stress responses or how the individual manifests competitive stress;
- (4) Establish that a consistent stress cue is a signal for the individual to focus attention on the performances;
- (5) Utilize a variety of coping skills to gain control of the situation and focus attention

appropriately (Weinberg, 1983). Once individuals understand how their arousal levels affect performance and learn to control it, they then can effectively concentrate appropriate levels of arousal towards present situations and tasks. Staying away from past experiences where their performance was ineffective is an important consideration since poor past experiences may cause similar reoccurrences if similar practices are re-used. An efficient means to achieve a present focus of arousal is to center on internal, current feelings. This can be achieved by controlling reactions to the stress of the upcoming situation. Tension and stress can be controlled through such physical activities as stretching tight musculature such as the diaphragm and trapezius with slow deep breathing. This process will relax the body and begin the concentration process needed to achieve proper arousal levels (Orlick, 1980). Controlling thoughts towards upcoming situations is an important factor in improving performance. By learning to tune into the body, one can have total integration with all the physical and mental components of the performance. The athlete must be totally engulfed in the here and now with a sense of effortlessness in whatever task is to be performed.

Chapter Three

Conclusions

The practice of sports psychology involves teaching individuals to recognize the importance of gaining control. Counselors in the junior high and high school settings can follow the strategies discussed in this paper which utilize sports psychology methods so as to enable students to gain more control over themselves. As research varifies, individuals who have learned to gain control will improve their performance levels.

The extent to which the five strategies discussed, attentional focus, self-talk, relaxation, mental imagery, and preparatory arousal, may be used, depends on the individual students needs and skill development. A program of skills training can be tailored to the needs of an individual student's performance based on a joint evaluation concluded by the counselor and coach. The counselor and coach may choose to implement the sports psychology methods through counseling procedures of goal setting and/or behavior modification in developing individual programs.

An example of such a program may involve students who have high anxiety levels prior to test taking and students who have high anxiety levels prior to athlete

competition. This group of high anxiety students would be formed and relaxation techniques taught and applied towards the students' situation through behavior modification strategies. Students would learn to cope with and lessen anxiety prior to test taking and athletic competition.

By mixing the talents of counselors and coaches, individuals can be helped to recognize problem areas, gain control over these problem areas, and use alternatives to improve their performance. It seems that the primary concern for coaches and counselors is to make a joint effort to improve the performance of those they are working with and help these individuals by teaching them effective life skills. Counselors and coaches can implement a team effort by utilizing sports psychology and counseling methods in classroom or small group situations to improve performance levels of those students with a desire or need to improve.

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