

# Sports Psych

## Introduction to Psychological Skills

### Introduction

Whether you are an athlete or a coach, mastering the mental game of sport will allow you to reach greater heights as a competitor than you could otherwise achieve by focusing exclusively on the physical side of sport. You can use these tips in a variety of ways including incorporating them completely, sequentially and additively into your own game plan or selectively choosing from among a variety of techniques -- the ones that most interest you at a particular time.

### The Importance of Mental Skills

The best place to start is to outline why mental skills are so important to performance and why they are often neglected by coaches and athletes. Yogi Berra has been quoted as saying, "sport is 90% mental and 50% physical." You can question his mathematical savvy, but if you're an athlete, coach or fan, you can't question his wisdom. Most of us realize that it is often deficits in our psychological game rather than errors in our physical performance that keep us from performing at optimum levels in practice, games or matches. Both research and anecdotal evidence support the notion that it is not the physical talents or abilities that separate athletes and teams, or successful versus less successful performance. Rather, the psychological dimension in sport is the most frequently cited variable explaining a given sport outcome or individual performance. In fact, when over 600 United States Olympic Athletes were interviewed after the 1996 Olympic Games and asked to list the top ten factors essential for success at the higher levels of competition, mental skills were listed in the top five spots. Not surprising, the single most important quality cited was mental toughness. In sixth place, athletes listed physical talent.

What do these elite performers know that the rest of us can utilize to supplement our traditional training methods? They understand and develop the psychological dimension of their game. No matter what sport you play or the level of competition you face, recognizing and developing your mental game plan should be a significant priority.

### The Fundamentals

Every sport is comprised of four fundamental components, namely: the technical, tactical, physiological and psychological. Briefly, the technical components represent the actual skill necessary to play a given sport. Examples include dribbling in soccer, shooting in basketball, passing in football, etc. The tactical aspect refers to the strategies and concepts employed to showcase those techniques in competition. Examples include what system to play in soccer, what offense to run in basketball, or what offensive schemes to utilize in football. The physiological components refer to the physical demands of a given sport. Examples include the cardio-respiratory demands, strength, flexibility, anaerobic needs, etc. The fourth component is the focus of "Colleen's Psychological Skills,": the psychological dimension. Examples include: motivation to compete, mental toughness, self-confidence, imagery, goal setting, etc. These are the topics that will be addressed each month.

## Mental Skills - Article 2

### Goal Setting

Goal setting is one of the foundational building blocks of a successful psychological skills training program. In fact, coaches and athletes can utilize the goal setting principles that I'll discuss in the next two months of eteamz articles, with each of the four pillars of sport we have previously discussed: namely, the technical, tactical, psychological and physiological areas. To understand goal setting better, and more specifically, how you can utilize its powerful effects to your competitive advantage, it's important to define what goals are.

### Definition

Goals are a specific standard of proficiency achieved in a specific area of performance within a specified time. For example, an athlete could set a goal to improve their free throw shooting ability by taking 30 extra shots every day immediately after practice. All of the criteria listed in that definition must be met (along with several other important standards) in order for behavior to be considered a goal. The two key questions to determine if goal setting is successfully being implemented are: Can I measure it? Can I see it? Goals are more than wishes, hopes and dreams. Dreaming is important in sport and in life, but dreams lack an essential ingredient inherent in effective goal setting, and that is the observable, measurable behaviors required for achieving the end result. For example, I might wish that I was an Olympic performer and I might dream about making an Olympic team, but when I goal set, much more is required of me in order to reach my goal standard.

## Types of goals

There are three types of goals. Each will be defined and a sport-related example will be provided for clarification.

**1. Performance Goals:** Performance goals are goals in which participants focus on process-oriented standards relative to one's own best performance capabilities. They emphasize the PROCESS by which a given outcome is achieved. Another key component of process goals is that the participant has much more control on the achievement potential and successful outcome of these types of goals.

Examples of process goals are increasing the number of tennis serves taken in order to improve ones' first service percentage, committing to a consistent pattern of three strength training sessions per week in order to increase the amount of weight lifted for a one-rep max, and engaging in first person imagery training two days per week for the next month of practice.

**2. Outcome Goals:** Outcome goals are goals in which participants focus on the end result, the outcome, or a PRODUCT-type measurement as the standard of comparison. These are the most often recited and typically utilized types of goals among coaches and athletes. While participants "think" they have control over outcome goals, the facts indicate that athletes and coaches have only partial control (at best), or little to no control over the ultimate successful achievement of outcome goals.

Examples of outcome goals are: to become a starting member of the team this season, to win the league championship, or to achieve the school scoring record before graduating.

**3. Do Your Best Goals:** Do your best goals are obvious from the title itself. The focus is not on specific standards of proficiency, process or outcome other than asking the participants to "give it their best shot", try hard and "do your best".

Examples of this third type of goal would be saying, "I'll try my best to play well in today's game," "We'll try our best to play good defense," or "I'll try to be a better coach this season." What is clear in these examples, is that do your best goals lack the specificity and detail that are so apparent in the first two types.

While it may be easier and more convenient to set outcome goals in sport, experts recommend and the sport psychology literature clearly indicates, that the most favorable results in performance occur when athletes and coaches set performance goals. In fact, process goals will allow you to achieve greater success, if they are correctly and consistently utilized, than either outcome or do your best goals.

## **Mental Skills - Article 3**

### **GOAL SETTING PRINCIPLES**

Goal setting helps direct an athlete's attention to appropriate behaviors necessary for athletic success, it helps increase an athlete's persistence in the face of adversity and difficulty, and, it increases effort and output in both practice and competition.

There are three types of goals: Performance goals, Outcome goals and Do Your Best goals. The preferred type of goals to set are performance goals that specify both the observable behavior and the time frame for when these changes will occur. I generally recommend that for every outcome goal that a coach or athlete sets, it should be accompanied by at least four process goals. For example, if you set a goal to become a starter on next year's team (an outcome goal) you should set four process goals that will increase the likelihood of you achieving that goal. These performance goals would be behavior or activities over which you have complete control and your participation and ultimate success is virtually guaranteed.

#### **Examples**

An example of four process goals to accompany the outcome goal of starting might be:

1. I will complete my strength training program three days per week all year long
2. I will stay after practice on Wednesdays and Fridays to take 50 extra shots with my right foot and 50 extra shots with my left foot
3. I will watch game film at least two hours every week and write down three key tactical points for each video session
4. I will complete five, five-minute imagery sessions each week all season long

#### **Lessons**

What should be clear from these examples is that:

- a. Athletes can completely control whether or not they engage in these activities (whether or not the coach ultimately selects them to be a starter)
- b. Engaging in these activities will lead to improvements in each of the specified areas of performance and these improvements will increase the likelihood of achieving the outcome of becoming a starter
- c. Each of these goals provides a specific standard of proficiency and a specified time for achievement

#### **Guidelines**

In order for goal setting to work for you and your team, the following guidelines should be followed:

1. Goals should be difficult but realistic to achieve (Unrealistic goals create anxiety and disbelief)
2. Goals should be specific, observable and measurable
3. Set proximal (short term) as well as distal (long term) goals
4. Set performance or techniques goals rather than outcome or do your best goals
5. Write your goals down ("ink what you think")!
6. Discuss your goals with at least one other person
7. Set the goals yourself rather than simply adopt someone else's goals for you
8. Provide and get goal support through interactions with coaches, teammates and other important people in your life
9. Evaluate your goal effectiveness and adjust the goal difficulty in the future so those goals are optimally challenging for your current abilities and your future potential

10. Set goals in each of the four pillars of sport: technical, tactical, psychological and physiological

## **Mental Skills - Article 4**

### **COMMON ERRORS IN GOAL SETTING**

The focus of this discussion will be on anticipating and safeguarding against the most common errors in goal setting. As you may recall, previous articles have distinguished goals from "wishes, hopes and dreams" by their specific, behavioral and observable nature, and the fact that they must include a specified time period for their completion.

Further, we described three basic types of goals, namely: product goals (where the focus is on the outcome; like "becoming a starting player"), process goals (where the focus is on one's own performance and on factors directly under the athlete's control; like "running four 60 yard wind sprints after practice three days per week"), and "do your best" goals (which sound altruistic and positive but invariably lack specificity and detail; like "I'm just going to try my best when I lift weights this week").

You were encouraged to consider setting goals for each of the four pillars of your sport: the technical skills, the tactical requirements, the physiological demands and the psychological components. Once athletes (and coaches, for that matter) begin to set observable, measurable goals and specify the date for completion, it is not uncommon to experience increased motivation and excitement as goals are successfully accomplished. This exuberance leads to two of the most common goal setting problems:

- Setting too many goals too quickly
- Setting unrealistic goals based on one's current level of performance

While there is no magic formula for how many goals to set in a particular time frame, I generally encourage athletes to focus on a maximum of three to four goals per week: a "goal set." The challenge is to keep the goals meaningful, relevant and motivating. Goals should not control your athletic life or become burdensome to the training regimen. Rather, they should serve as guideposts and standards of excellence that are individually significant. They should be difficult but realistic and only you can determine what that may be.

For example, if you are currently bench-pressing 100 pounds, it would be an unrealistic goal to bench-press 125 pounds (a 25-pound increase from your previous best) in one week's time. Let's say your long-term goal is to be able to bench-press 125 pounds, however. Perhaps the best way to utilize effective goal setting is to make a commitment to "complete three sets of 10-12 repetitions three days per week at 100 pounds for the next four weeks, using perfect form." The process of bench-pressing consistently each week, following proper strength training guidelines will be behavior completely under the athlete's control (barring injury or illness) and bring a person closer to reaching their ultimate goal.

Likewise, if your goal is to improve your free throw shooting percentage over the last season, then establish a realistic long term goal of say, a 10% improvement in nine months and then devise a "goal set" plan to achieve that outcome. Specifically, you may commit to shooting an extra 100 free throws each week for three months, or you may "goal set" to shoot however many free throws are required to make 50 after practice two days each week. Both of these goals would be excellent means to bring you closer to achieving your long-term goal of improved free-throw shooting percentage.

The key point to emphasize is that it is better to design fewer, high quality goals and commit to their successful accomplishment than to set too many goals and hope that several will be accomplished. Decide what aspects of your performance are most important to you and which skills you want to focus on for a particular week. Once you've made that determination, you are then ready to create your weekly "goal sets."