

A STUDY OF PERFORMANCE OPTIMIZATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPARATION IN SPORTS COMPETITION

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempt to make an overview of various techniques, sport psychologist adopt in psychological preparation of athletes for peak performance. To attain peak performance in sports competitions, coaches and athletes should not base their prospect on physical training on sport skills alone rather should integrate both the mental and physical aspects of performance. During sport competitions athlete should enter the competition with the proper mind-set so as to achieve optimum performance. The importance of a sport psychologist to athletes or sports team in this respect cannot be overemphasized; therefore the sport psychologist is in a position to provide the needed therapy to athletes who have been psyched-out by personal, motivational and environmental factors. The paper therefore recommended among others that athletes should be advised for practice mental and psychological skill training and, faster rehabilitation of an injured athlete should be done as this would help to achieve success in peak performance.

KEYWORDS: Peak Performance, Sports Skills, Psychological Skills, Attention and Personality.

INTRODUCTION

Sports psychology is a relatively new sport science that has only begun to emerge in recent years in India. Despite the accelerated growth of sports, we find that the field of sports psychology is still in its infancy. Research on sports psychology intervention has concluded that the use of psychological tools and techniques lead to heightened efficiency in one's performance, as reviewed in the literature. Moreover, there is a need to understand the development of sport psychology in the Indian context while ascertaining the importance of psychological intervention in sports. A number of authors have added their voices to the definition and meaning of psychology. Colmna (2006) opined that psychology is the study of the nature,

functions and phenomena of behaviour and mental experience. The etymology of the word "psychology" implies that it is simply the study of the minds, however most of modern psychology have little to do with the mind. Many authors define psychology simply as the study of behaviour or the science of behaviour which is an improvement on the understanding of the concept over the definition given by William (1965) that psychology is the science of minds law. Psychology attempts to examine and understand the causal process which contributes to behaviour change. It attempts to discover why organisms behave differently by understanding, analyzing, predicting and controlling behaviour of organisms. It is therefore that

branch of science which is concerned with the behaviour of organisms. The establishment of psychology as an independent discipline separate from the discipline of philosophy and biology from which it emerged is attributable to the German psychologist Wilhelm (Max) Wundt (1832 – 1920). Who published a book on principle of physiological psychology in 1873 and the book became the first major textbook of experimental psychology. Wilhelm is also known for his establishment of the first psychological laboratory in Leipzig in 1879. Hayes (1998) observed that psychology as a formal branch of knowledge is usually considered to date from the 1880s, with the work of the pioneer of psychology Wilhelm Wundt, William James and Herman Ebbinghaus, before that period it existed as a branch of philosophy.

Early Development of Sports Psychology in India

Sports psychology is a subcategory of psychology in which the principles and techniques of psychology are applied in a sports setting. The primary interest of sports psychologists is to provide and maintain an athlete's mental health and well-being in the midst of the stresses of a competition and to improve their athletic performance. Sports psychology as a field of study in India, is extremely young and still evolving. One could say it is still in its nascent phase. In order to understand the development of sports psychology in India, it is necessary to understand its provenance in India. Until the 1960's, we see a scarce application of science to the area of sports in India. What sparked the interest of researchers in sports psychology in India was the early publications of

sports psychology studies in journals of medicine, physical education and psychology that found its way to India from abroad in the 1960s and 1970s. This stimulated a few research studies being conducted in the 1960's which vitalized a large development of research studies in the 1970's. With the formation of the Indian Association of Sports Medicine (IASM), we see the first major development of the Indian sports science movement in 1970. Another important milestone for sports psychology in India was seen in 1977, during the seventh annual conference of the IASM, when some delegates from the IASM interested in the psychological aspects of sports came together to establish a group of their own. With this, we see the conception of the Indian Association of Sports Psychology. Over the years, we see the establishment of many more institutes and associations like the Sport Psychology Association of India (SAPI) that are facilitating the development of sports psychology in the country.

Current Status of Sports Psychology in India

The establishment of the Faculty of Sports Science under the Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports in 1983, paved the way for training sportspersons on a scientific line, aiming to impart scientific knowledge. It accelerated the development of sports science in India and sports psychology particularly. Due to such efforts, we see the term sports psychology come to life in its true essence in India, with sports psychologists at the National Institute training athletes prior to international competitions and accompanying them when they partake in

competitions like the Asian Games or Olympics. Succeeding the 1982 Asian Games held in New Delhi, the Government of India established a separate ministry for sports. This reflects the positive and zealous attitude of the government towards the development of sports. We also see a substantial increase in the budget allocations and provision of facilities for research in sports science and sports psychology thereafter. The current research in sports psychology can be further divided into four different categories: (i) personality and athletes, (ii) anxiety and arousal, (iii) intelligence and creativity and (iv) other aspects and variables. Currently in India, personality is the most studied topic in sports psychology followed by arousal. Sports psychology has now become an important facet of sports science in India. This field of study has turned a new leaf today as it has become a subject of practical application without any constraints. Even though the field of sports psychology is developing in India and promises to be a critical component of sports science in the future, as of today, there is a great need for a more integrative approach of psychology and sports science, we are nowhere near meeting our goals. There are still so many obstacles and impediments barring the growth of sports psychology research that have resulted in many associations being rendered defunct. These obstacles are primarily a result from a lack of awareness and understanding, myths and most importantly, a lack of formalized academic courses that offer sports psychology as a subject leading to a deficiency of adequate number of trained professionals in this area of study.

Issues in sports psychology in India

It is a well-researched and widely established fact that psychology is an integral component and plays a vital role in enhancing the performance of an athlete in order to help them achieve their peak. Despite this, why is it that sports psychology in India is still in its nascent phases and faces a large number of drawbacks? One of the foremost reasons could be the negative connotation associated with the term 'psychology.' For a vast segment of our population, the term 'psychology' hints at issues related to mental health or psychopathology. Till date many individuals including athletes and athletic coaches think of going to a psychologist as having a 'problem.' and that can prove to be a difficult perception to overcome. There is a lack of awareness about the understanding of what sports psychology is and what exactly do sports psychologists do. Despite the recognition that psychological aspects are important in an athletes' performance, many individuals including athletes fail to recognise and accept its importance. We see a lack of understanding and awareness towards this field of study. Another issue linked to the previous one is the importance of an athletes "image". Image management is a key issue in India wherein the players want to maintain a problem-free and healthy image of themselves. This linked with the negative connotation of psychology proves to be a major setback for athletes to seek the guidance of sports psychologists. The lack of trained resource personnel and inadequate funding prove to be a major setback for the field of sports psychology in India. This has caused many sports psychology associations to collapse. The

most part of people working in the sports psychology sector in India do not have the essential and needed training simply because it doesn't exist. The coverage of this field of study seems to be only superficial with the lack of established academic course offerings. We also find misunderstandings and myths surrounding this field. Even though sports psychology is now more accepted than before, it still carries stigma in the eyes of many athletes, coaches and other individuals. Some of these myths include: sports psychology is only for athletes who are mentally weak or ill, sports psychology is a quick fix, sports psychology is only for elite or highly skilled athletes and sports psychology is simply about positive thinking and hypnotizing the athlete.

Need for Sports Psychology

Let's look at the following scenario- a highly talented and skilled athlete, on whom rests hopes of thousands, is physically well prepared and is dreaming of a gold. But just then, at the start of the game, he realises he hasn't efficiently dealt with his nerves (and thoughts), which are essential for him to perform well and focus better. Now, is it solely the athletes fault that he did not know or learn how to manage the emotional or psychological aspects of the game? Similarly, when Ron Artese, a basketball player for the Los Angeles Lakers credited psychological health for his performance and success on the court, quite a few took that as strange. However, it has been long recognised that psychological skills are critical and just as important for an athlete playing at any level. In India too, athletes and coaches began to recognize the importance of mental training as an essential component

in the international competitive sports arena. The gradual decline of performance in popular and mainstream Indian games like cricket and hockey created a great amount of concern and in a way, hastened the acceptance of sports psychology as a channel to aid athletes' performance. Athletes with a requisite of 'mental toughness' are more likely to be successful. In the past, it was believed that such skills were attributed to an individual's genetic endowment or were acquired early in their life. This view has now been replaced by a common acceptance that athletes and those that work with athletes are capable of learning a wide range of varied psychological skills that play a crucial role in learning and performance. One of the primary concerns of sports psychology has been the deleterious effects that high stakes competitions can have on an athlete's performance. Competition too can facilitate performance in an individual but what's important to address here is the conditions under which it does. To answer this, the relatively new field of study, sports psychology focuses on the psychology of stress and coping. It is critical to note that stress is seen as a major factor in the failure of athletes to effectively and completely utilise their skills in varied performances. The increased stress in competitions can cause athletes to not just react mentally, but also physically in a way that can negatively affect their performance ability. Some of these negative symptoms faced by athletes include them becoming tense, increase in heart rates, breaking into a cold sweat, worrying about the outcome of the competition and finding it harder to focus or concentrate on the task in front of them.

This has not just turned the attention of athletes, but also that of coaches to take a growing interest in sports psychology with particular focus on competitive anxiety. This increasing interest focuses on techniques that athletes can use in a competitive setting to maintain control and also optimize and boost their performance. These techniques help the athlete to relax and focus their attention on the task of preparing and participating in the competition positively. With the current research findings in this field of study and the positive effects it has on athletes and their performance, we can conclude that psychology is another weapon in an athlete's armory in gaining the winning edge.

Importance of Sport Psychology and how it may benefit athletes

Psychological training plays an integral part in an athlete's holistic training process when carried out in conjunction with other elements of training. While preparing for a competition, simple psychological skills too can help athletes manage their competitive performance environment. Some of these skills include:

- 1) Relaxation skills, e.g., progressive relaxation, slow controlled and deep abdominal breathing and autogenic training.
- 2) A mastery of all the different attentional styles or types of concentration.
- 3) Both kinaesthetic and visual imagery.
- 4) Self-talk
- 5) Development of pre-computation mental routines that they should follow prior to their competition on game day.

In addition to this, this field also deals with injured athletes who experience at least three different emotional responses

commonly: frustration, isolation and disturbances in mood. The techniques employed in sports psychology helps the injured athlete cope more effectively with these emotional responses and help prepare the athlete to get back to their sport and games.

Sports psychology is considered an important element in sports for various reasons. The following points emphasise the importance of this field:

- 1) Psychology plays a very unique yet critical role in the enhancement of an athlete's physiological capabilities like strength, flexibility and speed. This enhancement in athletes is largely driven by motivation. It is widely accepted that psychological capabilities or power can increase an individual's physiological capacities.
- 2) Psychology is said to play a crucial role in the learning of motor skills. This depends on the athlete's level of readiness, that is, their psychological and physiological readiness. Psychological readiness is closely related to the learner, here the athlete's state of mind. It is the desire and willingness to learn a particular skill. Sports psychology is also helpful in the social-active, autonomous and cognitive stage of motor skill learning. On the other hand, physiological readiness is the development of strength, endurance and flexibility in the athlete as well as the strengthening of various muscle and organ systems for better performance of motor skills required for their sport.
- 3) An athlete's behaviour while they are engaged in competitive sports can be better understood with the help of sports psychology. One can come to know the athlete's level of interest, attitudes, drives,

instincts and personality. Sports psychology not only plays a role in understanding these behaviours in an athlete, but also helps in the medication of behaviour in different sports situations.

4) Another important role that sport psychology plays is, controlling the emotions of athletes not only during competitions but during training as well. Some of the negatives faced by athletes include disgust, negative self-thinking, anger and feeling of ownership among many others. These negatives can bring about spontaneous changes in their behaviours which if not controlled in time, can hamper and hinder their performance. Sports psychology plays a decisive role at such junctures. It helps maintain a balance in the arousal of emotions which can further improve performance.

5) Sports psychology helps prepare athletes psychologically for competitions. Sports psychologists also give psychological tips to athletes before and after their competitions. They help them deal with their anxiety levels and create a will to 'win' in athletes. 6) Other than common problems like stress, anxiety and tension that athletes face, there are some other emotional problems that they are subjected to like frustration, depression, panic attacks and anorexia. The knowledge of sports psychology can prove to be helpful in such situations. Various techniques can be taught to athletes faced with these problems like techniques of concentration and relaxation.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, one can say that sports psychology plays a key role in enhancing performances in athletes while dealing with the different mental qualities like

confidence, commitment, emotional control and concentration which are linked to success in sports. It helps the athlete to stay focused and continue to sustain their best performance. Currently, India, the second most populous nation in the world, doesn't have the fundamental and required infrastructure to serve its athletes to enhance their psychological skills. However, we do see several professional as well as amateur sport teams take interest in utilizing the services of sports psychologists and scientists to help athletes achieve optimal performance. There still is a need to conduct more research in order to understand the psychology of sports better in the Indian context to determine whether these research findings hold true with the ones obtained in other countries. Lastly, if sports psychology is to reach greater heights in India, top priority must be given to establish programmes and courses in educational institutes which would lead to the birth of first-generation Indian professionals specifically trained in the field of sports psychology.

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