

Exercising the Mind: Sports Psychology

Prasanna Panditharatne Consulting Psychologist

Sport psychology is fast becoming a growing area of interest and building an identifiable profile leading up to the many national and International sports events, with both athletes and coaches increasingly aware of the edge that mental fitness gives to an elite athlete's performance.

So what is Sport Psychology and what can it offer?

I hope to dispel some of the “**mystery**” around Sport Psychology by answering some common questions about it and ways psychological skills can enhance sporting performance.

1. How can sport psychology help my sporting performance?

Traditionally a great deal of emphasis has been placed on physical fitness and technical skills as the key to an athlete's sporting performance. Both these factors are important, however athletes, coaches and sporting organizations are now recognizing that optimal sporting performance requires an approach that incorporates physical fitness, technical and tactical skills and **MENTAL FITNESS**. An athlete who is both physically and mentally fit will have an edge over competitors who choose to concentrate on only one aspect of their fitness or approach to performance.

A Sport Psychologist is part of the coaching team concentrating on developing and maintaining mental fitness skills just as your strength and conditioning coach might assist in developing and maintaining physical fitness. A Sport Psychologist may work with an athlete on their own, and/or with their coach or on a team basis. They also work as part of a medical support team.

2. What can Sport Psychology offer?

Sport Psychology offers help to athletes in a number of ways:

- Developing mental skills that may assist in enhancing sporting performance. These mental skills might include:
 - relaxation techniques that can be used to achieve a 'just right' feeling so that you can perform to the best of your ability without feeling too anxious or too lethargic.
 - Concentration techniques to make sure that you remain focused on important components of your performance and reduce attention to distractions and factors that are of your control.
 - visualization techniques that can be used in skill development and to enhance performance
 - establishing pre-competition and post-competition routines
 - developing a positive attitude and self-confidence and ways to challenge negative thoughts that may impact on performance.
 - Strategies to overcome difficulties that an athlete may be experiencing both on and off the sporting field.
 - Helping coaches develop their communication and coaching skills
 - helping an athlete in the recovery phase of an injury/illness.
 - Helping an athlete maintain balance in their lifestyle
 - debriefing athletes following major competitions.

3. Is Sport Psychology difficult to understand?

Not really – a lot of sport psychology is common sense. In fact, you've probably been using a lot of psychological techniques without knowing it!

A sport psychologist is trained to help people understand any difficulties they are experiencing and suggest some ways that they can overcome their difficulties so helping them to perform at a level that matches their physical skills and potential.

4. Will I have much work to do if I start using Sport Psychology?

One thing that must be made clear is that Sport Psychology is not about 'magic wands'. A Sport Psychologist does not convert athletes into work champions with one wave! Whenever you are learning a

new skill, it does require practice and hard work. Like a coach, a Sport Psychologist can suggest ways to achieve a goal or identify problems, but it is up to the athlete to do the work required.

5. Can my coach benefit from Sport Psychology?

Yes, coaches can also benefit from Sport Psychology. Firstly, Sports Psychologists don't work alone. They work closely with coaches and the medical support team so that the athlete has the benefit of information from a variety of sources. Many more coaches are now recognizing the need to incorporate psychological skills into skill development and training methods. Coaches may also seek advice on how best to communicate with athletes so that a mutually effective coach/athlete relationship is achieved and maintained.

6. When is the best time to use Sport Psychology?

Ideally, Sport Psychology techniques should be used all the time – in fact, these techniques should be just as much a part of your training routine as weights, Cricket, rugby, running or any other physical skill training. Often people come to a sport psychologist when things are going wrong. This is OK – the Sport Psychologist can spend time talking to the athlete and coach to identify where the difficulties lie and what is needed to overcome the difficulties. However, psychological techniques can also be used when things are going right – to make sure they stay that way – or to prepare an athlete to make the transition to compete at a higher level such as National or World Championships!

The best time to start getting mentally fit is now!

About the writer

Prasanna Panditharatne Consulting Psychologist

The writer is a qualified Practicing Psychologist (Registered both locally and internationally) and has substantial experience in the field both nationally and internationally. He has a broad understanding of Sri Lanka and its '**cricket culture**'. Also has years of experience in guiding both local and international cricketers, bringing their ability to the optimum level. He strongly believes that advanced and up to date Psychological Counselling techniques can and will bring about a positive and long lasting impact on Sri Lankan cricket.

As a cricket loving Sri Lankan patriot he strongly believes that it is imperative for the better future of Sri Lankan Cricket that the National team employs the services of a well-trained Sri Lankan Psychologist.

Contact writer by prabu1@pbpconsultancy.com or visit www.pbpconsultancy.com