

Are You Mentally Prepared for Competition?

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With the start of a new academic year comes a flurry of activity in preparing for the upcoming season. In the next few weeks, coaches and athletes will have completed their physical exams, strength tests, conditional drills, and strategy planning sessions. It seems that all preparations have been made to assure a competitive season, but have they really? Have you assessed your team's needs in the areas of motivation, arousal control, mental toughness, and goal setting? In short, are you and your team mentally prepared for competition?

Over the past twenty years, sport psychologists have become increasingly available to coaches and athletes to help them assess their "Mental Game," and set up training programs to meet their respective needs. As a result, a body of knowledge has been generated that can be used by coaches in defining specific steps that can be taken to establish a mental training program. The checklist provided guides the coach and athlete through these steps.

Goals...Team and Personal

One of the most important mental skills an athlete can develop is the ability to set effective performance goals. In fact, the effectiveness of goal setting at improving performance is one of the most consistent findings in the psychological literature. Both team and personal goals are important because studies have shown that modern society emphasizes equally the needs of both the team and the individual, whereas in the past, team needs were valued over individual considerations. Efforts to influence achievement motivation, therefore, must be targeted to both team and individual levels.

Mental & Physical Skill Practice

Despite the mythology that surrounds the motivational processes of Vince Lombardi, Knute Rockne, Herb Brooks, and the like, mental toughness is not achieved through dramatic motivational speeches. Mental skills, like physical skills, improve with practice. Threading mental practice into the quiltwork of drills and scrimmages can not only enhance your team's mental toughness, but improve their execution as well.

Clear Roles and Focus

Communication is the process of sending and receiving information. Research has shown that improved communications between coach and athlete will increase motivation and team harmony. While there are many techniques for enhancing the effectiveness of communication, it may be that it is the content of coach/athlete communication that is most important. Athletes who have a clear picture of their role and function in the overall team scenario will be able to set realistic goals and create more accurate visualizations.

Building Team Harmony

"The best team does not win as often as the team who gets along best." Although this is a generalization, it does point out the importance of team cohesion and team harmony in the team's overall level of success. Setting aside time for teammates to exchange positive

observations and feelings for what they appreciate in each other's performance can produce a level of team harmony that will elevate the level of play as well as enjoyment quotient.

Get Prepared

These suggestions constitute just a few of the numerous sport psychology interventions to help to coaches and teams to build and maintain motivation. If you believe that you and your team can benefit from becoming better mentally prepared, then avail yourself of the library of sport psychology books, cassettes, and videotapes now available. Consulting a sport psychologist who can provide hands-on training prior to, as well as during the season has proven to be of great benefit to a growing number of teams. Either way, you will find that proper mental preparation, like physical preparation will greatly enhance your competitive edge.