

Part 1

Performance Development

PUTTING SPORT PSYCHOLOGY IN CONTEXT

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To thoughtfully and successfully implement an intervention in the context of sport psychology requires that the difficulties experienced by an athlete be identified and that the best intervention be used to assist the athlete. This often requires that the difficulties presented by an athlete seeking sport psychology services be categorised into the following four categories.

- I. Performance development
- II. Performance dysfunction
- III. Performance impairment
- IV. Performance termination

The interventions that will be best suited to the difficulties experienced by the athlete will differ according to the above categorisation. As part of a four part series each of the above categories of will be addressed. In this article the focus is on the first, namely: performance development.

| The Story of Mary | |
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| Here is an example of a tennis player to illustrate a typical performance development case: | |
| The situation | The performance obstacle |
| Mary is a young, talented tennis player playing in the semi-final of a national tournament for the first time. She has worked hard leading up to the tournament and has shown the best form of her career thus far. She registered convincing wins and has not yet been challenged by anyone in this tournament. | Thus far in the tournament Mary has shown no signs of struggling with her performance. |
| She is playing the defending champion of the tournament in the semi-final. The night before the match Mary struggled to fall asleep, but eventually got a few hours of rest. | Due to the nature of the match and her opponent, it is expected that Mary experience some stress in anticipation of the match. |
| At the court she pays attention to her opponent’s warm-up routine and wonders how she is going to handle her powerful serve. Every now and then she glances over to her opponent and she notices the powerful, loud sound of the ball hitting the back of the court after her serves. This is the first time she paid any attention to her opponent during the warm-up. | Mary has now become aware of her opponent during the warm-up and her attention has drifted away from what she needs to do to prepare. Her focus is now on her opponent’s preparation process and not on her own. |
| Further into her warm-up her stomach starts tingling with the feeling of butterflies and she suddenly feels a fraction slower on the court. Moving around the court suddenly feels like a big effort and the ball just seems not to be hitting the sweet-spot of the racket. She is now also starting to worry about how she can compete today if she is not hitting the ball well. She cuts her warm-up routine short and decides to rather go sit and attempt to calm her nerves. | Mary’s focus on her opponent has resulted in her experiencing symptoms of stress and her thoughts start become self-doubting. She then becomes focused on these symptoms and thoughts and in an attempt to rid herself of these, decides to leave the stressful situation to rather focus on controlling her physical symptoms. |



Part I: Performance development:

This category is characterised by a lack of psychosocial or interpersonal difficulties and the aim is to enhance the athlete's performance, for example, improving a soccer player's focus and concentration after making a mistake during a game. Performance enhancement strategies are the order of the day as an intervention.

Two possible ways in which Mary could benefit from performance enhancement strategies include accepting the experience as it is, and keeping her attention on task-relevant information.

1. Accepting the experience

Athletes often do not fully accept the situation as it is, but rather would like to change the experience to suit them. This is not something which is exclusively done by athletes, but seems to be a trait that we as humans often employ. At any given time we experience a parade of thoughts and emotions that is evoked by our experience of a situation.

In the case of Mary, it is normal, even expected, for her to experience some nerves the night before her match, and also just prior to and during the match. Mary seemed to get uncomfortable with this as she most likely believes that she cannot perform well when she is too nervous. Most often it is not the nerves or negative thoughts which adversely affect our performance; it is our attempts to get rid of these. This results in splitting our attention where only a part of our attention is on the task at hand, while the rest is on attempting to change the internal experience of the situation. Changing the internal experience (nervousness) often turns out to be a futile exercise.

Mary would have been better off if she were able to become mindful of the various thoughts, nervous feelings and any distractions that were present during the match. If she was able to accept these as a part of the sporting

experience of playing in your first semi-final, she could have again refocused on her own process of her warm-up. Accepting the experience for what it is results in the athlete not believing that they have to avoid, change or control the experience. This gives Mary the opportunity to remain focussed on the task at hand.

2. Keeping task relevant attention

For an athlete to create the best opportunity for optimal performance their attention needs to be present and on task relevant information. This state is characterised by a quiet mind where the athlete trusts his/her body to execute their skills.

In the case of Mary, she started to pay attention to the warm-up routine of her opponent. Her attention was not fully on what she needed to do for her warm-up. That also got her mind to wander into the future and created doubt about her ability to compete in this match (present).

To explain this using a mathematical metaphor, Mary only had 40% of her attention on her task of warming up, the other 60% was on her opponent and on trying to control her internal experience. That means that at best, she only gave herself a 40% chance of successfully completing her task of warming up sufficiently. Mary would have benefited from keeping her attention on what was relevant for her to be best prepared to take on the challenge.

Summary

To summarise, the performance development category is characterised by a lack of psychosocial or interpersonal difficulties, where the aim is to enhance the athlete's performance. The role of sport psychology in this regard is to teach and apply performance enhancement strategies, which will be beneficial to the athlete both in practice and competition 🏆