

Part 2: Performance Dysfunction

PUTTING SPORT PSYCHOLOGY IN CONTEXT

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Introduction

To thoughtfully and successfully implement an intervention in the context of sport psychology requires that the difficulties that an athlete experiences 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. In part one performance development was addressed and the role that performance enhancement strategies play in this category was explained. In part two we move to the performance dysfunction category.

Discussion

Part II: Performance dysfunction:

This category is characterised by the presence of identifiable psychological barriers which create difficulties for the athlete and subsequently affect performance negatively, for example a tennis player who experiences his coach as cold, unforgiving and harsh and therefore he struggles to perform well because he just receives criticism from his coach. This also reminds him of his father's view where he was never good enough.

Barriers to performance could emerge from two main areas:

Firstly, external life events could cause a psychological barrier. When a family member close to the athlete passes away, the performance of the athlete could be affected adversely.

Lets look at a more detailed example of a performance dysfunction case.

The Story of Michael Here is an example of a soccer player to illustrate a typical performance dysfunction case:	
The situation	The performance obstacle
Michael joins a new club team following his family's relocation to a new town. Their relocation happen to be one month before the new season starts and the coaches are always happy for new players to join the club. At the trails Michael really impresses with his talent. He arrives for the first training session and from the outset shows his high level of skill and fitness, outplaying many of the other club members.	Thus far there is not a performance obstacle yet, but the relocation to a new environment increases the chances of adjustment difficulties.
The other boys at the club, as always, tend to give the new comers a bit of a hard time, as this is their way of testing to see if they are mentally strong. With Michael it is no exception, there would be the odd sarcastic comment towards him and he would not really be included in conversation or activities other than when directly instructed by the coaches.	Thus far there is still no observable performance obstacle as this team behaviour does not seem to have a major effect on Michael.
Michael attends all the training and it goes fairly well. Michael remains quiet and reserved, coming for the training but leaving as hastily and quietly as he arrived. It goes unnoticed that Michael was actually a friendly and outgoing person, who wants to play for a team where everyone helps and supports each other.	There is very limited interaction between Michael and the other players, but it is assumed that he is a quiet guy. Due to knowbody knowing him it goes unnoticed that his behaviour has drastically changed.
The first match of the season arrives and despite his talent and skill, Michael makes no real impact on the game. This trend continues for the next three matches and the coaches don't understand why his performance is not matching up to his potential. The coach advises Michael's parent to possible seek the services of a sport psychologist due to Michael under performing in the matches.	The distress experienced by Michael has now negatively impacted his performance. He possibly experiences low motivation to want to play for this team in addition that his focus in the games is rather on his exclusion from the team than on his execution of his skills.

Secondly, an internal psychological characteristic of the athlete could cause a barrier when the athlete encounters a certain environment. It can be expected that the performance of an athlete will drop if a highly disciplined athlete who likes to follow a given routine suddenly finds themselves in a very relaxed atmosphere where things are left to develop at their own time.

A sports counselling intervention will be needed to address these concerns, and performance enhancement becomes a secondary goal of the intervention. This does not mean that the enhancement of the performance of the athlete is not as important, it simply means that any traditional performance enhancement strategies will not be effective if the athlete is experiencing wider reaching difficulties. For this reason the sports counselling intervention should be addressed first before any performance development can be completed effectively.

In the example of Michael, it could not be expected for Michael's performance to improve if he does not find a way to get around his feelings regarding his new team and team mates. This could be addressed in two ways:

Firstly, the intervention should help him handle

adverse situations like this by addressing his personal characteristics (outgoing nature and needs of acceptance in the team) and how he could develop a way to handle being excluded from the group as well as receiving occasional criticism.

Secondly, the intervention could also address the interactional style of the team. If the team were able to treat and interact differently with Michael, they would get a much more positive response from him.

Summary

To summarise, the performance dysfunction category is characterised by the presence of identifiable psychological barriers which create difficulties for the athlete and subsequently affect performance negatively. While the aim would be to enhance the performance of the athlete, sport counselling interventions in performance dysfunction cases would have to be addressed first before performance enhancement strategies could be effectively introduced 🌈