

Handling Pressure and Stress

Psychological stress, more than any other factor, has robbed athletes of physical energy, victory and enjoyment in sport (Martens, 1987). Often enough, athletes blame the environment when they perform poorly or feel stressed (Vernacchia, 2003). They may blame the media or intense rivalry or may feel excessive pressure from sports associations, its officials and their own coaches.

Highly effective athletic performers however learn to keep their composure or find ways to manage their stress or emotional responses.

What can you do as a coach?

Identify possible stressors for your athletes before the competition. Be able to identify symptoms of stress such as increased heart rate, muscle tension, sweaty hands, multiple visits to the toilet, negative thoughts and the inability to focus on the sport.

Expect and understand that athletes sometimes inadvertently make mistakes. Remain composed and calm and do not react negatively when they do. Help your athletes understand that mistakes occur and are part and parcel of being competitive athletes. Create a positive emotional climate. Encourage your athletes to learn from their mistakes and bounce back to perform at optimal level. This will only increase their potential for success in the sporting arena.

Practice and master approaches to manage stress during training sessions so that athletes can use them effectively in competitions.



Four approaches to assist athletes dealing with stress

1. Incorporate Relaxation Techniques into Training Sessions

Use progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) to reduce muscle tension and nervousness. Once mastered, athlete(s) should practice PMR prior to and during competition. PMR can also help athletes sleep easier before big events. Other relaxation techniques include rhythmic breathing and centering.

2. Thinking Positive

Help your athletes restructure thoughts so stress and anxiety is perceived positively. Counter negative self-talk ("I must not double fault") and encourage positive self-talk ("I will produce a great serve"). Self-talk presets the athlete to produce the behaviour that matches image and thought.

3. Taking Control of One's Attitude

A situation can be perceived positively ("What a great opportunity this is to show all these people how well I can play") or negatively ("How embarrassing it will be if I make a mistake in front of these people"). Provide the productive and positive perspective of a situation.

4. Regulating Activation Level

Be aware of when and how to increase or decrease an athlete's activation level, depending on skill type and the individual athlete's preference. For example, a forward in rugby may need to increase his activation level before making a tackle whereas a place-kicker may need to be very calm before executing a conversion.

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