

UGC - CARE LISTED

ISSN: 0974 - 8946

अनुसन्धान-प्रकाशन-विभागीया त्रैमासिकी शोध-पत्रिका

शोध-प्रभा

(A Refereed & Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Research Journal)

48.2 वर्षे तृतीयोऽङ्कः (जनवरी - मार्च) 2023 ई.

प्रधानसम्पादकः

प्रो. मुरलीमनोहरपाठकः

कुलपतिः

सम्पादकः

प्रो. शिवशङ्करमिश्रः

सहसम्पादकः

डॉ. ज्ञानधरपाठकः



श्रीलालबहादुरशास्त्रीराष्ट्रीयसंस्कृतविश्वविद्यालयः

(केन्द्रीयविश्वविद्यालयः)

नवदेहली-16



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ISSN: 0974-8946

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Psychological Aspects of Sports

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ABSTRACT

Sports psychology is a subcategory of psychology in which the principles and techniques of psychology are applied in a sports setting. The primary interest of sports psychologists is to provide and maintain an athlete's mental health and well-being in the midst of the stresses of a competition and to improve their athletic performance.

Current Status of Sports Psychology in India

Sports psychology as a field of study in India, is extremely young and evolving. Until the 1960's, we see a scarce application of science to the area of sports in India. Over the years, we see the establishment of many more institutes and associations like the Sport Psychology Association of India (SAPI) that are facilitating the development of sports psychology in the country. The establishment of the Faculty of Sports Science under the Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports in 1983, paved the way for training sports persons on a scientific line, aiming to impart scientific knowledge.

It accelerated the development of sports science in India and sports psychology particularly.

Aspects of Sports Psychology

Sports psychology is not one theory, but the combination of many overlapping ideas and concepts that attempt to understand what it takes to be a successful athlete. Indeed, in many sports, there has been a move toward more multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, looking at the interactions between psychological, biomechanical, physiological, genetic, and training aspects of performance. There are many psychological constructs affecting performance in sports as Mental toughness, Motivation, Goal setting, Anxiety and arousal, Confidence.

1. Mental toughness

Coaches and athletes recognize mental toughness as a psychological construct vital for performance success in training and competition (Gucciardi, Peeling, Ducker, & Dawson, 2016). Mental toughness helps maintain consistency in determination, focus, and perceived control while under competitive pressure (Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002). Mental toughness determines "how people deal effectively with challenges, stressors, and pressure irrespective of circumstances" (Crust & Clough, 2005). For athletes and sportspeople, mental toughness provides an advantage over opponents, enabling them to cope better with the demands of physical activity. Beyond that, mental toughness allows individuals to manage stress better, overcome challenges, and perform optimally in everyday life.

2. Motivation

Motivation has been described as what maintains, sustains, directs, and channels behavior over an extended amount of time (Ryan & Deci, 2017). While it applies in all areas of life requiring commitment, it is particularly relevant in sports. Not only does motivation impact an athlete's ability to focus and achieve sporting excellence, but it is essential for the initial adoption and ongoing continuance of training (Sutton, 2019). While there are several theories of motivation, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) suggests that activity is most likely when an individual feels intrinsically motivated, has a sense of volition over their behavior, and the activity feels inherently interesting and appealing. Optimal performance in sports and elsewhere occurs when three basic needs are met: relatedness, competence, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

3. Goal setting and focus

Goal setting is also "associated with increased wellbeing and represents an individual's striving to achieve personal self-change, enhanced meaning, and purpose in life" (Sheard, 2013). A well-constructed goal can provide a mechanism to motivate the individual toward that goal. And something big can be broken down into a set of smaller, more manageable tasks that take us nearer to achieving the overall goal (Clough & Strycharczyk, 2015). Athletes can use goals to focus and direct attention toward actions that will lead to specific improvements. Goal setting can define challenging but achievable outcomes, in any sporting level or skills. A specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound goal should be clear, realistic, and possible.

4. Anxiety and arousal

Under extreme pressure and in situations perceived as important, athletes may perform worse than expected. This is known as choking and is typically caused by being overly anxious (Kremer et al., 2019). Such anxiety can have cognitive (erratic thinking), physical (sweating, over-breathing), and behavioral (pacing, tensing, rapid speech) outcomes. It is important to distinguish anxiety from arousal. The latter refers to a type of bodily energy that prepares us for action. It involves deep psychological and physiological activation, and is valuable in sports. Therefore, if psychological and physiological activation is on a continuum from deep sleep to intense excitement, the sportsperson must aim for a perceived sweet spot to perform at their best. It will differ wildly between competitors; for one, it may be perceived as unpleasant anxiety, for another, nervous excitement.

5. Confidence

Confidence is ultimately a measure of how much self-belief we have to see through to the end something beset with setbacks. Those with a high degree of self-confidence will recognize that obstacles are part of life and take them in stride. Those less confident may believe the world is set against them and feel defeated or prevented from completing their task (Clough & Strycharczyk, 2015). Self-confidence also taps into other, similar self-regulatory beliefs such as staying positive and maintaining self-belief (Sheard, 2013). An athlete high in self-confidence will harness their degree of self-belief and meet the challenge head on. However, there are risks associated with

being too self-confident. Overconfidence in abilities can lead to taking on too much, intolerance, and the inability to see underdeveloped skills.

Several professional as well as amateur sport teams take interest in utilizing the services of sports, psychologists and scientists to help athletes achieve optimal performance. There still is a need to conduct more research in order to understand the psychology of sports. If sports psychology is to reach greater heights in India, top priority must be given to establish programmes and courses in educational institutes which would lead to the birth of first-generation Indian professionals specifically trained in the field of sports psychology.

Conclusions

Conclusively, one can say that sports psychology plays a key role in enhancing performances in athletes. While dealing with the different mental qualities like confidence, commitment, emotional control and concentration which are linked to success in sports, it helps the athlete to stay focused and continue to sustain their best performance.

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