Sport Psychology: What it is, what it isn’t, and how it may be helpful...

Swim Bike Run St. Louis, August 2006

© AllWorld Performance, LLC / Joe Mannion, MS. All Rights Reserved.
Sport Psychology: What it is, what it isn’t, and how it may be helpful…

By Joe Mannion, MS

What thoughts, feelings, and images come to mind when we hear the word “psychology”? Perhaps, a picture arises of an ominous and stoic bearded man sitting next to a couch. How about uneasy feelings that quietly utter, “psychology is for crazy people”? Maybe reading “sport psychology” in the title of this article evokes the scene of an athlete discussing how her mother is to blame for her shoddy performance. I use the word “we” deliberately because, after many years of sport psychology study and practice, I can’t claim to be immune to these stereotypic (and erroneous) images either.

Psychology, and especially sport psychology, however, are often about helping “well adjusted” people get even better at what they do, reach their best more often, and experience greater enjoyment.

Recently, I asked a group of triathletes what they thought of when they heard the word, “psychology.” A couple attendees shouted, “Run the other direction!” …And these were the people who showed up for the workshop! I guess “run” is a start – after all, motivation can be an important part of performance.

“Run the other direction” speaks volumes about the lingering apprehensions and misconceptions swirling through many of our minds about psychology. Addressing this “elephant in the locker room” is important, perhaps critical, before many athletes are ready to explore the performance and enjoyment benefits of sport psychology collaboration.

Clarification of what sport psychology is and is not needs some attention. Mental skills are a big part of sport psychology, and they relate to our regulation of thoughts (e.g., “I’m an awesome triathlete”), emotions (e.g., “I feel so depressed on the bike today”), and behaviors (e.g., “I can’t sleep before my race”). To perform well in sport (and most performance-related endeavors including business, music, and dance), we must attend to the important task-relevant cues in the environment (e.g., “there’s my transition station”) and in ourselves (e.g., “my quads are getting too tight”) and respond optimally (e.g., “put down goggles; put on bike helmet,” or “ease the activation in the quads”).

Coaches help us understand what those cues are for our particular sport and teach appropriate technique and training methods. Mental skills determine how quickly we recognize those cues and how effectively we respond. As athletes, our choices begin with what we eat for breakfast, continue through our training or competition or active rest for that day, and end when we decide to bed down for sleep.

Our thoughts and emotions color all of these choices. “I don’t have time to eat breakfast.” “My kids are driving me nuts, and I can’t wait to stick my head in the pool where I can’t
hear anyone.” “This warm-up doesn’t feel so great… I suck… I’m not going to try so hard today… chocolate sounds good.” “I know my knee hurts, but if I don’t practice my coach will think I’m lazy, or I’ll feel terrible about myself.” “I’m out for the season so why stick to my rehab plan so closely?” All these considerations, and so many more, affect our performance, our stress-recovery balance, our relationships, and our happiness.

Mental skills, such as staying in the moment, letting go of task-irrelevant distractions, and maintaining a nonjudgmental presence of mind, respond to training just like physical skills. Using that model can help when approaching this elusive dynamic of performance. Like physical skills, mental skills will improve with careful planning and consistent integration into daily practice. When the mind is clear and less disturbed by potentially destabilizing factors (e.g., a disappointing race leg, forgetting a water bottle, or glum feelings about oneself), everything from nutritional advice to technical coaching and injury rehabilitation will be taken onboard and integrated more smoothly. In similar ways, sport psychology consultants work with coaches to increase their effectiveness and to enhance their enjoyment as well.

Sport psychology, however, is not a panacea, a magic cure-all. Apart from spiritual intervention, if such faith is part of your belief system, our genetics set a range on our physical potential. The extent to which we reach those potentials depends on numerous factors, not the least of which include many psycho-social factors.

Psycho-social factors can be categorized as (1) interpersonal (i.e., between individuals) and (2) intrapersonal (i.e., within an individual). Interpersonal factors include communication with coaches, support (or lack of) from family and friends, and pressures within and outside of triathlon. Intrapersonal factors are the psychology of the athlete and include motivation, happiness, anxiety regulation, confidence, spirituality, patience, the ability to stay task-focused, and the ability to cope with failure and success.

Psycho-social factors vary from childhood through later adulthood, with each stage presenting particular psychological territories to navigate. Well established research shows the two most important factors kids cite for participation in sport are to have fun and to make friends. This stage is a very important time to help children distinguish their value as human beings as unassailable from scoreboard results.

Sport psychology is much about “helping ‘well adjusted’ people get even better at what they do, reach their best more often, and experience greater enjoyment,” but we can see how damage is easily incurred through sport participation as well, especially in this early and critical time of identity formation. Well-meaning adults often gear practices to meet their needs (e.g., to be perceived as a successful parent or coach through superior athletic understudies) over the child’s needs (e.g., to have fun, to make friends, to learn effective and healthy psychological skills), often because they don’t understand the changing motives and developmental limitations at these ages.
By early high school, obesity research reflects this less than optimal experience as a sharp decline in sport and fitness participation. This is no minor detail. Many medical experts agree obesity and its consequences will bankrupt the United States’ healthcare system in a matter of decades. Adolescent concerns about winning and making it to the “next” level surge at this point, if earlier misguidance hadn’t prematurely socialized them with such attitudes or discouraged them from participating at all.

From this point forward, sport psychology work intersects Swim Bike Run St. Louis reader territory. Let’s talk triathlon. Jennifer Meyer wrote a great article in the May issue of SBR. “Transitions are not breaks.” In fact, we know they represent opportunities to shave off time. What happens, though, when our minds are still in the pool, fighting a disappointing split-time? We start to come undone. Our identity is too attached to our performance, and we are stuck in an inner battle rather than following the optimal transition strategy. We drop our helmet. Our muscles are over-tensed, and we waste energy on the bike. We are not having fun. We’re suffering.

Or maybe newfound success is creating new pressures, new expectations, from others and from ourselves. Or we can’t seem to perform in races the way we performed dozens of times in practice. Or we’re looking for ways to enhance mental and physical recovery from a recent injury. Or maybe like SBR’s, Racer X 2005 Year in Review, we won’t even give it our all because that way, if we fail, we will know we could have done better. That’s safer. Again, our identity, our worthiness, is so attached to outcomes that we self-handicap for later rationalizations.

At the end of the athletic cycle, we grow older and can’t perform like we did a few years ago. A devastating injury could end our career prematurely. The consoling news is these mental skills, such as concentration, planning, consistency, and a healthier sense of self, will continue to serve us. These skills help us move forward and become more effective in non-athletic pursuits as well. We can pass healthier and more effective skills along to younger generations so they can internalize them earlier and feel better about simply being.

Lastly, helping athletes work through more severe difficulties is an important service and should not be diminished or stigmatized. Athletes live in the same world as non-athletes and deal with depression, eating disorders, anger, relationships, and so forth. A recent survey suggests 1 in 5 U.S. citizens have been in therapy at some point, and many of my sport psychology peers and I can be included in that 20 percent.

Occasionally, some bad press or word-of-mouth stories contribute to our apprehensions and discourage good work from being done. These suboptimal experiences often result from unqualified individuals trying to sell the services as a magical elixir. Likewise, do-it-yourself systems can have limited success because it’s difficult to recognize suboptimal or self-defeating patterns when we are part of those patterns. This do-it-yourself limitation is
the same reason we have coaches and trainers providing feedback and direction. They can also draw upon their experience when what works for one person is not working for you.

Our client lists, like those of coaches, are not always the best indications of quality. Feel free to ask us if we have a degree in sport psychology, where we studied, how long we’ve practiced, if we still engage in supervision, and what the scope of our services is. Our only priority should be your health and well-being.

I hope some of your curiosities and concerns have been addressed because working with a good consultant can be a lot more efficient than working in isolation.

Consider an illustrative story I have found to be one the most compelling cases for having an integrated approach to training. After finishing my Master’s coursework in Georgia, I decided further studies and practice in Australia would be a better option than finishing my thesis in a timely manner. Australia’s sporting system is much more integrated than ours in the United States. Sport psychologists, exercise physiologists, sport nutritionists, and a host of specialists routinely work together to help athletes (and their coaches) develop.

Australia’s sport system is also relatively “inclusive” in contrast to the more “exclusive” system in the U.S. We tend to find the cream of the crop by weeding out the “weak” at each level. In Australia, the system is designed to have multiple levels of current talent so if your skills bloom late you continue on the “C” team, or “D”, or “E” until moving back up to the “A” team.

Before you start dogging “9th place medals” like Robert De Niro in Meet The Focker’s, look at the numbers…

In the past two Summer Olympics (Sydney 2000, Athens 2004), Australia ranked fourth in the final medal count, just behind the U.S., Russia, and China. The U.S. selects its National teams from a population, or talent pool, of just under 300 million. Russia has a talent pool of nearly 150 million, and China has approximately 1.3 billion citizens. How big is the talent pool for the development and selection of Australia’s Olympic teams? Only 20 million. Per capita, using “inclusion” and a highly interdisciplinary approach, Australia has, arguably, the most effective sport development system in the world.

For further questions or discussion on how sport psychology may enhance your performance and your enjoyment, in sport or in other performance-related areas such as business, music or dance, please feel free to contact me. If timing is an issue, we can remain in touch and stay informed in the interim on my communication list. This email list includes occasional messages about upcoming workshops, the latest research findings, recommended readings, and other updates.

Joe Mannion has a Master of Science degree in sport psychology and is available to athletes, parents, coaches, league organizers, performing artists, and executives for more information, for useful literature, and for personalized collaboration at 314.265.4271 and joe@AllWorldPerformance.com.
RESOURCES

Blog  
Reading Lists  
Downloadable articles  
Collaboration examples  
Meditation information  
Event calendar  
Speaking information  
AllWorld.Newsletter sign-up (email)  
AllWorld.ActionWire sign-up (sms)  
Media kits

SECTIONS

Athletes  
Parents  
Coaches  
Performing artists  
Entrepreneurs & executives  
Speaking planners  
Media professionals

COMING

Videotaped interviews  
Web based workshops  
Web based meditation classes  
MP3 based programs & more!