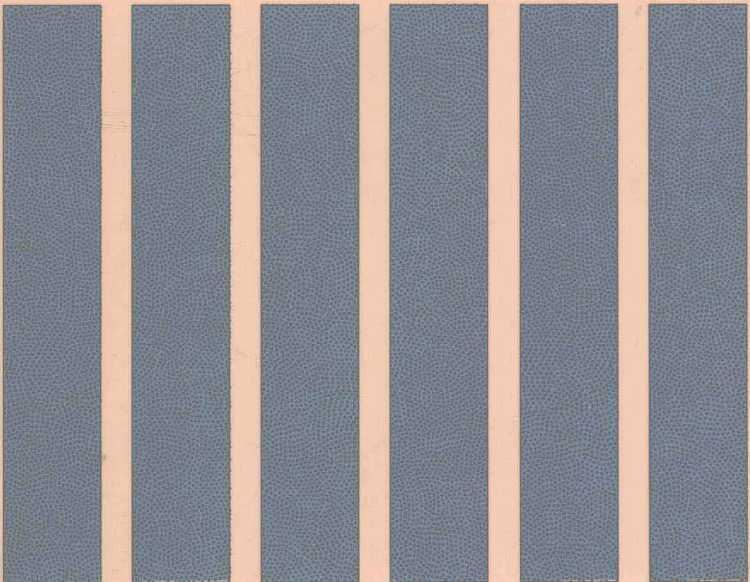


Second Edition

Sport Psychology

From Theory to Practice



MARK H. ANSHEL

Sport Psychology

From Theory to Practice

Second Edition

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University of Wollongong
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Gorsuch Scarisbrick, Publishers
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Preface

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The coaches of the team that I was observing during the season were (1) screaming obscenities into the faces of their athletes, (2) making promises to players they couldn't (or wouldn't remember to) keep, (3) punishing team members for even the slightest "infractions," (4) refusing to explain to players the reasons for team decisions, policies, and strategies, (5) teaching skills ineffectively, if at all, and (6) generally treating team members in a negative and disrespectful manner. I was not surprised that team morale was poor. And so was the season record. For me, these observations signaled the need for a book in *applied* sport psychology. Despite having expertise in the sport that they were coaching, these coaches obviously had much to learn about the psychological needs of athletes.

My experiences as a consulting sport psychologist for several collegiate teams and individual athletes indicate that coaches and competitors often do not apply even the most basic, common sense elements of effective leadership and competition. Ignoring (or perhaps unaware of) revelations by sport psychology research over the past two decades, many coaches use strategies for teaching skills, motivating athletes, and planning for competitive events that are no different than those used decades ago. In many ways the coaching profession is sadly ineffective; I have seen leadership strategies that consist of intimidation, disrespect, and the virtual absence of effective communication and empathy. Athletes, especially those exhibiting classic signs of pregame anxiety, often are not aware of mental techniques used to optimize psychological readiness and sport skill execution. Under these conditions, the sport experience is not enjoyable to the participants, and their disappointing competitive performance often shows it.

Many fine coaches in sport have the insight, skills, and personality to genuinely care about other people and help each athlete reach his or her performance potential. The teams of these leaders are typically successful, and their members are often very satisfied. What coaches do and how they do it have a significant impact on the athlete's attitude, feelings, and performance. Helping each competitor reach his or her potential is what coaching is all about. The effective coach takes the time to help a player learn, improve, and contribute to team success. The primary purpose of this book is to help coaches and sport participants alike reach a higher, more sophisticated level of expertise and thus make the sport experience a more satisfying and successful one.

This text fills a need for an applied sport psychology text based on credible, published research. Many sport psychology publications do a fine job of explain-

ing the theoretical framework and social-psychological foundations of this discipline. Others offer a handbook approach to using psychological strategies as a sport participant. This text addresses both needs. A deliberate attempt is made to base application on theory while avoiding scientific and statistical jargon so that persons at various levels of education, past experience, and expertise can feel comfortable with its content. Sport examples from media publications are used frequently to nurture the connection between the professional literature and real-life sport experiences. Building upon theoretical foundations, each chapter explains “real world” sport phenomena and how to maintain, enhance, or diminish them.

I begin the book (Chapter 1) with an explanation of the field of sport psychology, which also encompasses a related field of study called exercise psychology. Researchers in this new and emerging area are primarily concerned with the links between psychological factors (e.g., personality, emotion, and motivation) and exercise behavior. What are the psychological benefits of exercise and how does a person obtain them? What are the best ways to improve exercise participation and to help individuals maintain their exercise habits? In this way, the many tasks performed by sport psychologists may be applied in both sport and exercise settings.

The following are just a few chapter highlights of this text. Chapter 3 explains the underlying causes of an athlete’s emotions just prior to the contest and what to do about them. Anxiety and arousal are common feelings in sport that influence performance both directly and indirectly. Thus, coaches and players should help athletes control these emotions. How coaches and athletes interpret and explain the causes of the results of a contest also play an important role in future participation, which is the focus of Chapter 4. For instance, a player may be far less motivated if he or she feels that a lack of ability caused an error or loss. On the other hand, feeling that enhanced effort will help to determine future success likely will increase the individual’s motivation and self-image.

This text also includes two chapters that are rather unique in sport psychology literature. Chapters 8 and 9 deal with communication and counseling, respectively. These topics exist abundantly in other publications, especially in counseling and educational psychology texts, but they are not commonly applied in sport psychology contexts. Effective communication is the ability to transfer information. Counseling is the ability to listen and respond to a person’s feelings with the appropriate compassion, empathy, and valid information. In sport, the collective purpose of communicating and counseling is to have a positive effect on the athlete’s feelings and behaviors, both in and out of the sport domain. It is much more of a science than most people realize.

To lend additional credence to the application of cited research studies, this book includes portions of my conversations with many athletes. As these conversations show, ideas believed to be widely held “truths” in the coaching profession often are considered myths by athletes themselves. For example,

basketball and football coaches frequently give a pregame talk that is meant to motivate and “psych up” the team. But many athletes contend that a loud, assertive message has the opposite effect; they’re more apt to get “psyched out” than “psyched up.” These interviews provide a valuable source of information for effective coaching—through the athletes’ eyes.

To further familiarize the reader with sport psychology literature, a brief explanation about reading and interpreting sport science research is located in Appendix A, a unique feature to sport psychology texts. A wealth of information exists in the research literature about the factors—good and bad—that influence performance and about what coaches and athletes can do to promote the good and reduce or eliminate the bad. Having the skills to read published research studies will help practitioners access this information. This is an attempt to bridge the gap between research and application.

One underlying theme of this book is that success in sport is not necessarily spelled W-I-N. Despite the pleasure that comes with competing against and beating an opponent, sometimes athletes can derive far more enjoyment from their sport experiences if the quality of their performance during the contest is as important (and for child athletes, even more important) to sport leaders as the final outcome. Kids drop out of sport because it is not fun. Their team’s winning percentage rarely has anything to do with it. Coaches and parents have a wonderful opportunity to make a significant contribution to the lives of many individuals in sport. The message to the athlete or exerciser should be: “If you are going to make the effort to compete (exercise), do everything you can to reach your performance potential.”

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I would like to thank the many coaches who gave me the opportunity to interact with them and their players. Without firsthand experience, this book could not have been written with credibility. And I thank my wife, Sheree, for her moral support and comments on the first drafts, and for just being there during the writing process.

I dedicate this book to my father, Bernard, and to the memory of my mother, Rochelle, for providing me with the opportunity to learn, the drive to achieve, and the desire to care about others. They gave to me what I always try to give to my students—100 percent.

About the Author

Dr. Mark H. Anshel is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia. Dr. Anshel received his Bachelor of Science degree in physical education at Illinois State University. After working five years in the community recreation field, he returned to graduate school, earning a Master of Arts degree from McGill University in Montreal and a Doctor of Philosophy in psychology of motor performance from Florida State University.

In July 1988, Dr. Anshel immigrated to Australia to the University of Wollongong. He has been a sport psychology consultant in the United States and Australia to many coaches and sports teams. In addition, he has worked with hundreds of athletes and exercisers on the use of cognitive and behavioral techniques to improve performance. He is a full member of the Australian Psychological Society, serves on the Board of Sport Psychologists in Australia, and is a member of several professional organizations. He contributes often to the professional literature as a researcher and essayist, having written over 60 research publications and several book chapters. Dr. Anshel is the editor of the *Dictionary of Sport and Exercise Sciences* and author of *Aerobics for Fitness*. Although he has published on various topics, his primary research area concerns personal and situational factors related to coping with acute stress in sport.

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THE SCIENCE OF SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

1

The Chicago Black Hawks ice hockey team has been known to go to Las Vegas, Nevada, for a minivacation right in the middle of the National Hockey League season. Players have been quoted in the newspaper as saying that the team tended to win after such trips. "It is a move designed to make us relax and forget about the long season," one player said. Professional golfer Bill Rogers knew that he was in trouble as an athlete when he kept looking at his watch ("actually counting the minutes . . . until I could get home") during a golf tournament. He had no enthusiasm; golf was not fun any more. So he decided to take some time off, and he came back with the enthusiasm he needed to win. For Rogers, the game is fun again. Many major league baseball pitchers maintain an intimidating approach to competition. They never talk to an opposing hitter. "If they say hello (before the game), I just nod and walk away. . . . You don't ever want to make a hitter feel comfortable," one pitcher said as quoted in the media.

These three situations have something in common. They all recognize the importance of a mental factor that is at least partly responsible for success in sport. Feeling relaxed, having fun, and intimidating the opposition—the three objectives reflected in these examples—can be instrumental in achieving another objective: successful performance. More and more athletes and coaches have come to understand that there is more to sport success than practicing and playing the game. Psychological factors certainly influence, and sometimes even determine, the final score of a contest. Understanding these factors is what sport psychology is all about.

WHAT IS SPORT PSYCHOLOGY?

Sport psychology involves properly selecting and motivating athletes so that each participant competes at his or her capacity. To do this, the athletes must use strategies to "psych out" opponents, reduce or cope with extraordinary levels of stress, prevent drug abuse, develop successful team strategies, and teach and learn skills. Clearly, psychology is a central component of sport competition. Studying and using psychology in a sport situation gives one the ability to describe behavior ("athletes on teams that win consistently are more friendly toward one another than athletes on teams that consistently lose"), to explain

behavior (“the upset may have occurred because the favored team was underaroused; the underdogs were up for the game and ready to prove that they could beat a worthy opponent”), and to predict behavior (“if a coach teaches in an angry manner, the athlete will not retain the information because of anxiety and inability to concentrate on the information”).

Since the mid-1980s, sport psychology has become more and more linked to areas that go beyond sport performance. The most notable areas of study have been *psychophysiology* and *exercise psychology*. Whereas traditional sport psychology research and practice have been concerned with psychological inventories and performance outcomes, psychophysiological research examines the physiological (somatic) responses that influence or accompany cognition (thinking and emotion) and performance. For example, if poor performance is attributed to heightened anxiety, it would be of interest to know if changes in muscle tension, heart rate, or other somatic responses also inhibit performance. Such information allows sport scientists and educators to suggest the use of certain mental techniques (e.g., relaxation or imagery) to reduce the effect of these undesirable changes in bodily processes. Published research in recent years often includes physiological measures that help explain possible cause and effect relationships between a person’s thoughts or emotions and his or her physical performance (e.g., Hardy & Rejeski 1989; Petruzzello et al., 1991).

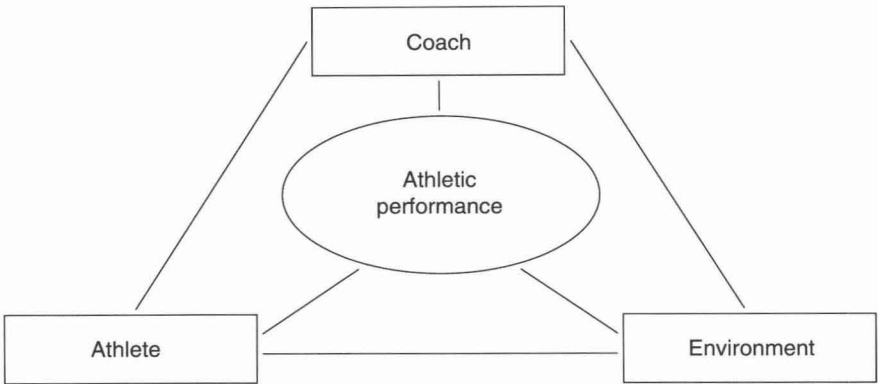
The area of exercise psychology has received increased attention in the sport psychology literature. Rather than examining sport performance, exercise psychology focuses on cognitive, psychophysiological, and situational factors that influence exercise behavior (see Anshel 1990a for a review of this emerging field). Examples of topics studied in this area include effects of physical activity on the exerciser’s emotions and certain psychological dispositions, reasons for engaging in exercise programs and the causes for dropping out of them, changes in personality due to improved physical fitness, positive and negative addiction to exercise, factors that influence an exerciser’s perception of his or her physical exertion, the effects of cognitive techniques on exercise performance, and others. The focus of this book will be to examine the extensive amount of research in this area and apply it to competitive sport.

What has become increasingly certain to educators, researchers, and coaches is that the field of sport psychology is a science. It is the study of human behavior in the context of participating in sport and of how behavior (performance) is affected by three primary sources: the athlete, the team leader (i.e., the coach), and the environment in which these individuals interact. (See Figure 1.1.)

The Athlete

Sports fans show a genuine interest in “their” teams through attending, watching, listening to, and reading about contests. The media devotes considerable time to

FIGURE 1.1 Factors that affect sport performance.



describing the events and the players who perform them. Reporters and announcers have become more sophisticated in their analyses of the factors that underlie performance. They often venture beyond describing someone as a good “game player” to explain the possible reasons for superior play in game situations. However, most sports fans do not consider important psychological factors when they are observing, or trying to understand, sport performance.

For example, professional tennis player John McEnroe has received considerable criticism for losing his temper on the court. However, McEnroe has admitted that he uses anger as a mental technique to get “psyched up.” To sport scientists, this is no surprise. That all athletes have an optimal level of excitation (arousal), which has a marked effect on the quality of their performance, is well documented. Athletes don’t want to become too aroused, just stimulated enough to play their best. The actions of football players on the sideline before the game, “high fives,” pregame team cheers, and other warm-up activities performed by the athletes all serve the purpose of establishing the desired emotional effect before the contest. Whether or not they are appealing to fans, self-induced arousal strategies (e.g., psyching up or expressions of anger) are an integral part of mental preparation and maintaining optimal performance for many competitive athletes.

Another important psychological factor in athletic achievement is *personality*: Is there a “personality type” that is predictive of quality sport performance? Can the coach predict sport success from a paper-and-pencil personality test? Do the personalities differ between athletes and nonathletes, between male and female players, and among athletes in different sports? Sport psychologists have devoted considerable research to the topic of personality in sport. The answers to the above questions, which might surprise you, are answered in this book.

Individual differences is another popular subject of research concerning the reasons athletes differ in performance even when they have similar skills. Why

do some players succeed under pressure in sport while others do not? What psychological factors separate the consistently successful competitor from his or her less successful counterpart? One could write a book on this last question alone. For example, this is what former heavyweight boxing champion, Mike Tyson, had to say in explaining why he would wake up at 4 A.M. to run in his prefight training regimen: "Because the other guy doesn't. I've got to prove to myself that I'm more disciplined than the other guy" (*Newsweek*, June 20, 1988, p. 56).

In the area of *youth sports*, in which participants typically range in age from 8 to 13 years old, sport psychologists are studying the effects of competitive activities: Should child athletes compete for awards? Do younger athletes have different psychological, emotional, and social needs than older, better-skilled players? If so, how can these needs be met through "healthy" sport involvement?

Another psychological factor to be considered is *motivation*: Why are some athletes more motivated than others, and what are the sources of their motivation? Why do some participate in sport because it's fun or desirable rather than because they are motivated by external factors such as awards, recognition, or money? What are some of the psychological factors that help to motivate athletes, and which ones demotivate them?

The Coach

Playwright Henry Miller once wrote, "The real leader has no need to lead—he is content to point the way." And so it is with effective coaches in sport. Given the resources of player talent and their knowledge of the game, the team leader's primary goal is to develop the physical and mental skills of athletes so that they, individually and as a team, can achieve consistent success. In team sports, how can the coach facilitate the interaction of all team players to promote group identity, player satisfaction, and group cohesion? But hold on! Does it really matter? Does meeting the players' needs for affiliation and group "togetherness" have much connection to whether or not the team succeeds? Is a player's performance affected by that player's satisfaction in being a team member or by whether he or she has close friends on the team? If winning is the coach's only objective in sport, should he or she care about the athlete's social and emotional needs? Considerable sport psychology literature is devoted to why sport leaders *should* care about issues that go beyond player performance if they want a successful team.

But not all coaches are aware of these important psychological issues. In fact, if we can agree that, in general, coaches learn their trade by observing and listening to other coaches (the modeling effect, or more to the point, "monkey see, monkey do"), the athlete's personal needs are not often taken into account prior to, during, and following the contest. For example, Kirschenbaum, Witt-

rock, Smith & Monson (1984) cite literature in which coaches publicly and frequently extol the virtues of criticism in sport. I have confirmed from my own experiences as a team consultant (Anshel 1989a) that many coaches tend to reject the interventions of others who attempt to modify coaching behavioral patterns.

For instance, one national survey of high school and college coaches indicated that 75 percent were not aware of the *Journal of Sport Psychology*, now called the *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* (Silva 1984). However, although 80.1 percent of the coaches surveyed said that they had “never” worked directly with a sport psychologist, 68.2 percent indicated a desire to do so—on a volunteer basis, that is. Would they be willing to pay for such consultation? “No,” said 64.8 percent. Perhaps they should.

Thus it appears that the lack of attention given to sport psychology information may be due to a lack of awareness about it. On a more positive note, journal articles and media reports in more recent years (e.g., Partington & Orlick 1987) indicate increasing acceptance of the need for psychological interventions in competitive sport.

Research findings in sport psychology do not support some of the common practices of coaches. Some of these practices may even be harmful. Here are some examples:

The pregame pep talk. Many coaches, particularly in contact sports, give an exciting, emotionally charged talk just before game time. Sport psychologists and some of the more successful coaches argue *against* a hyped-up pregame talk (see Chapter 7). Researchers have found that athletes are already anxious or “pumped-up” for the contest. An arousal-inducing talk before the game tends to excite the players above optimal levels; they become too excited (see Chapter 2). A low-key approach in which a review of information is presented may be more effective. Promoting enthusiasm for the contest should begin at practice.

“Winning is the only thing.” Feelings of anxiety and fear of failure already exist in players before the contest. The coach’s job is to help the athlete to manage (i.e., to cope with) these feelings (their total elimination is unrealistic and even counterproductive). Pregame messages that express the need to win only heighten this anxiety. To review skills and strategies, and then to tell players to go out and have fun or do the best they can is preferable to emphasizing winning.

Criticism. The effect of criticism on sport performance is clear: Sometimes it is helpful, but at all times its effectiveness is dependent on the manner in which it is communicated. As psychologist Haim Ginott recommends in his book *Between Parent and Child* (1965), authority figures should criticize behavior (“Jim, you’re not keeping your eye on the ball”), not personality or character (“Boy, Eric, that was a dumb play”). The same goes for anger. Ginott claims that anger per se is normal, and its free expression should be allowed (Ginott 1965).