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Health

7/16/2008

Building mental muscles

Sports psychology helps athletes get in the zone

By Chalan Harper
Colorado Hometown Newspapers

For athletes, the difference between winning and losing doesn't only come from how hard they've trained their bodies, but also their minds.

The stress of losing, and even winning, can be a lot of pressure — pressure which can yank an athlete out of that desired flow, when everything seems to go right during a competition.

As science advanced and the pressure to win mounts, athletes are turning to sports psychology as a means of mental calisthenics.

Dr. Stephanie Smith, a psychologist with Erie's Front Range Psychological Associates, said the benefits of sports psychology are vast and varied.

First of all, sports psychology is based solely on performance, and doesn't necessarily apply only to sports, but can expand into the realms of any performance, be it a clarinet recital or a big test, Smith said.

For athletes and performers, the biggest focus is stress management and the ability to limit distractions.

"Some things that sports psychology helps clients with are managing stress before and after a performance and to focus on what they can control and what they can't control," Smith said. "They can control thoughts, they can control emotions and how they prepare, but they can't necessarily control how they might be judged or what other competitors might do."

And because athletes, be they professionals or amateurs, invest so much into competition, sports psychology can also help athletes deal with both success and disappointment.

An example, Smith said, would be how to get back on a diving board if someone had hit their head during the previous competition.

Even winning, though it does feel good, can cause an athlete inordinate stress.

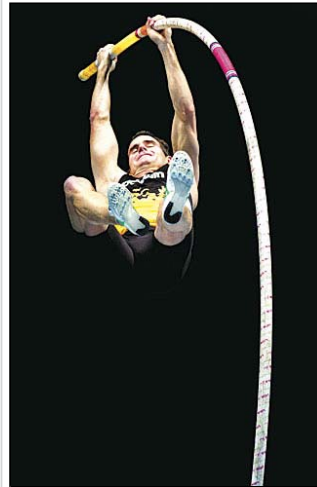
"That can be a huge amount of pressure," Smith said. "...There's a case for saying that's good pressure, but they're thinking, 'Oh my gosh, what if I choke? What if I can't keep this up?'"

A big part of this is managing stress and developing a preparatory routine, Smith said.

Professional pole-vaulter Pat Manson, of Superior, agrees.

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World-class pole-vaulter Pat Manson, above, incorporates sports psychology, alongside physical training, into the camps he runs out of his Superior home. File photograph

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Manson has been running a pole-vaulting camp for four years and likens it to being in a "mini Olympic training center," he said.

"I try to expose them (the athletes) to all those things you get as a professional athlete — one of those things is sports psychology."

Manson has a long history with sports psychology dating back to one of his professors at Kansas University.

Back then, Manson said he worked with Dr. Dave Cook once a week through college.

"He taught me what the benefits of having sports psychology on your side were, and it works," Manson said this week.

Manson said having a sports psychologist is like working with any other specialist.

"Top athletes hire weights coach to help with weights. Sports psychology...it's the same thing, it's just adding an expert to deal with the mind game of athletes — the end objective is just to perform better," Manson said.

A large part of sports psychology, Manson reiterated, is stress management and athletes learning to manage the state of mind advantageously.

"Obviously, when you're near the end of a big competition and the whole thing's on the line, fame and glory ... it's not hard to get fired up," Manson said. "With a small competition and the performance matters, it's being able to bring up your best performance and not just letting the situation dictate when you're going to be on.

"It's being on all the time," Manson added.

Manson said the goal was to train the body to perform the actions necessary, and training your mind to stay out of it.

"You hear the phrase being 'in the flow' or being 'in the zone,'" Manson said. "Athletes talk about how time slows down, feeling this state of relaxation. Your body is performing and you're keeping yourself, your mind, out of it. You trust.

"The best performances usually come in the state of flow," Manson added.

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