The purpose of this article is to examine how phase-specific psychological interventions were used in an annual training program of elite male basketball players. Psychological intervention introduced to elite athletes during their training program reflects the aims of each critical phase of the program, namely the preparation, competition, and transition phases. In addition, while conducting psychological consultations, the sport psychologist should take into consideration the specific objectives of other preparations in the training program, such as the physical, technical, and tactical. The specific psychology intervention in each phase of the basketball training program, the philosophical approach to the intervention process, and the reasoning behind the use of the certain psychological techniques at each specific phase of the program are discussed.

During the last three decades the game of basketball has become one of the most popular team sports in Europe. There are professional leagues in almost every country in both the eastern and western regions of the continent. Many of the professional clubs in each country participate in one of the three European leagues that are organized by the International Basketball Federation in addition to playing in their national leagues (International Basketball Federation, 2005). Various national teams participate on a regular basis in the European Basketball Championships that are held every 2 years, as well as in international basketball events such as the Olympic Games and World Championships. As a result of this national, continental, and international activity, elite European basketball players play in about 60 games during the competition phase of the season, with daily practices being held throughout the season.
In order for the elite European basketball players to attain and sustain a high level of proficiency, their training programs should use knowledge from various sport-related domains, such as exercise physiology, nutrition, sport medicine, and sport and exercise psychology. An important requirement is effective cooperation among the coaching staff and all other professionals who are involved in the training process.

A typical training program for elite athletes in both individual (e.g., judo, gymnastics, and swimming) and team (e.g., basketball and soccer) sports is composed of three phases—preparation, competition, and transition (Bompa, 1999; Zatsiorsky, 1995). Four specific types of preparation are included in each phase: physical, technical, tactical, and psychological. Each phase makes a specific contribution to the athlete’s success; however, the interaction among the four phases of preparation is probably the determining factor in the quality of the practice and its contribution to the athlete and to team performance (Blumenstein, Lidor, & Tenenbaum, 2005).

The purpose of this article is to examine how phase-specific psychological preparation was used in an annual training program of elite male basketball players. Our main contention is that the psychological preparation in the seasonal training program should take into consideration, as well as complement, the physical, technical, and tactical preparations in order to maximize its positive benefits. We demonstrate the use of sport psychology interventions in different phases of the training program. Emphasis is made on the psychological services provided to the elite basketball players during the competition phase.

**Critical Phases in an Annual Training Program: General Principles**

According to leading sport scientists (e.g., Bompa, 1999; Matveyev, 1981; Zatsiorsky, 1995), a training program for elite athletes is composed of three critical phases: preparation, competition, and transition. The length of each phase varies according to the type of sport in which the athletes compete. In basketball, for example, the preparation phase is the shortest part and lasts about 6 weeks, the competition phase is the longest and lasts about 7–8 months, and, finally, the transition phase lasts about 2 months. The length of the phases can also vary in individual sports; for example, the length of the preparation phase in judo is about 6 months (Blumenstein et al., 2005), and in canoeing and kayaking it is about 5 months (Blumenstein & Lidor, 2004).

The main objective of the preparation phase is to provide the athletes with a general foundation for the physical, technical, tactical, and psychological components required for the upcoming season in their sport. The preparation phase is composed of two subphases: general preparation (GP) and specific preparation (SP). Among the objectives of the preparation phase are to improve the motor abilities and techniques required by the specific sport and to familiarize the athletes with the basic strategic maneuvers required for their specific sport (Bompa, 1999).

For an elite basketball player, however, the objectives of the preparation phase might not be so simple. In addition to the work devoted to basic strategic behavior, namely repeated practice of certain defensive and offensive skills, an elite player...
also aims to develop his or her arsenal of movements that are used during the actual game. For example, an elite player attempts to add more styles of fakes or dribbles, thus increasing the number of options he or she can use in offense. Therefore, during the preparation phase, basketball players should spend time not only in improving their familiar skills but also in acquiring new skills, or at least new variations of the ones they already know.

The main objective of the competition phase is to use all training factors to improve the athletes’ motor and psychological abilities so that peak performance can be achieved (Bompa, 1999). More specifically, in the competition phase the athletes improve their sport-specific abilities and practice psychological preparation, refine their skill level and technique, refine tactics and strategies implemented during competitions and games, and maintain the level of their GP. Because of the length of the competition phase (e.g., 7–8 months), players should approach the instructional processes of improvement and refinement as continuous goals. Players are required to improve and refine skills and techniques in actual competition—in situations of pressure. Therefore, technical and psychological performance is implemented and assessed under pressure, as well.

The objectives of the transition phase are to enable psychological rest and relaxation and to make sure that an acceptable level of the athletes’ GP is maintained (Bompa, 1999). During this phase the athletes usually stay active and prepare themselves for the next preparation phase.

In each critical phase, emphasis is made on four fundamental preparations: physical, technical, tactical, and psychological preparation (Bompa, 1999; Zatsiorsky, 1995). Physical preparation is considered to be the major component in most training theories (e.g., Harre, 1982). One of its objectives is to develop the unique fitness components such as endurance, strength, or flexibility required for the specific sport, thus refining the specific motor abilities necessary for attaining a high level of achievement during the competition phase.

The objective of the technical preparation is to master the patterns of movements and specific motor skills required for the sport (Bompa, 1999). Repetitive task-specific practice is required to develop effective sport-specific skills. There is emphasis on improvement of accuracy and speed of movement.

The objective of the tactical preparation is to develop various strategic behaviors among the team members (Bompa, 1999). Athletes learn and practice competition or game plans that help them effectively perform the specific skills and techniques they have acquired and mastered during the technical phase. In ball games such as basketball the players should develop a game-understanding approach that reflects the coach’s philosophy of offense and defense.

Psychological preparation provides the athletes with specific psychological techniques that can help them effectively cope with the mental and emotional barriers that they are likely to encounter during the competition phase (Blumenstein et al., 2005; Bompa, 1999). Among these psychological barriers are states of high anxiety, fear of failure, “choking,” and low self-confidence.

A training program for elite athletes can be composed of more than one cycle of the critical phases (Bompa, 1999). In some sports, such as basketball and soccer, there is a break in the middle of the competition phase. In such cases the training program is composed of two cycles, Cycle 1 and Cycle 2, each made up of preparation, competition, and transition phases. In other sports, such as judo and track and
field, the training program can be composed of three or even four cycles of phases because of the high number of major competitions throughout the season.

**Sport Psychology Programs in Basketball**

Long-term empirical studies and anecdotal evidence support the notion that appropriate sport-enhancement psychological techniques provide effective mental preparation for practices, competitions, and games. Among the psychological techniques found in the literature of sport and exercise psychology are goal setting (Burton, Naylor, & Holliday, 2001), imagery (Hall, 2001), focusing attention (Moran, 2003), relaxation and recovery using biofeedback apparatus (Blumenstein & Bar-Eli, 2005), and preperformance routines (Lidor & Singer, 2003). Empirical findings provide support that such psychological techniques can enhance sport performance in both individual and team sports (see Abma, Fry, Yuhua, & Relyea, 2002; Short et al., 2002).

A few applied sport psychology programs have been provided to basketball coaches and players (see Brown & Burke, 2003; Burke, 2006; Henschen, 2001; Henschen & Cook, 2003; Mikes, 1987). These programs consist of psychological techniques aimed at coping effectively with psychological barriers. For example, Brown and Burke provided practical advice on coping with injuries, staying motivated throughout the season, playing in the zone, and maintaining confidence. Henschen and Cook and Henschen presented individual and team psychological techniques used by professional basketball players to cope with issues such as slumps, motivation, use of free time, fragile egos, cliques on the team, and the *end of the bench* syndrome. In addition, they outlined a few psychological strategies to help players deal with the media, handle success and failure, and cope with trades. Mikes proposed techniques such as focusing attention and body awareness, with the aim of strengthening the cognitive and mental readiness of basketball players. In addition, techniques such as imagery and self-talk were introduced for the player to use before, during, and after practices and games, as well as psychological advice for specific game situations such as ball handling, free-throw shots, and rebounding (Mikes). Recently, Burke presented a variety of psychological techniques (e.g., imagery, self-talk, and preparatory routines) for dealing with psychological situations, such as pressure, loss of confidence, and sitting on the bench, to be used by the individual player and the whole team. In addition, he provided concrete examples of how to deal with injury and develop mental and physical routines for free-throw shots.

Although such sport-enhancement programs provide coaches and players with useful guidelines for psychological preparation, one of their constraints is that they are introduced independently from the training process. We claim that these psychological programs do not take into consideration the current training phase of the training program in which the players are involved. The psychological load experienced by the players varies considerably in each phase of the training program. The psychological preparation must reflect the specific needs of the players in each of the training phases.

In a recent article (Blumenstein et al., 2005), the relationship between the psychological preparation and other training preparations, namely physical,
technical, and tactical, was explored in one individual sport. It demonstrated how the benefits of psychological preparation are apparent in the physical, technical, and tactical preparations in the sport of judo. Specific psychological guidelines were provided for judokas who practiced in early phases of the season, namely in the SP and GP, competed in minor tournaments, and competed in a major sport event such as the Olympic Games. Each psychological intervention was matched to the specific objectives of each specific phase of the training program.

To our knowledge, the use of psychological preparation while taking into consideration the physical, technical, and tactical preparations in team sports (i.e., basketball) has not yet been examined. In individual sports, the sport psychologist or consultant should consider only the needs of the individual athlete while attempting to complement the psychological preparation with other preparations (Blumenstein et al., 2005; Blumenstein & Lidor, 2004). In team sports, however, it might be more difficult to complement the psychological preparation with the physical, technical, and tactical preparations (Burke, 2006; Lidor & Henschen, 2003); the sport psychologist should consider the needs of the individual player and the team as a whole in each phase of the training program. Differences among players in factors such as their role in defense and offense, experience, skill level, and social status must be taken into account in the team’s psychological program, as well.

In order to provide a conceptualized framework for team sports in which the psychological preparation complements the physical, technical, and tactical preparations, we will describe how psychological preparation was used in an annual training program of elite male basketball players in all three phases of training: preparation, competition, and transition.

Use of Psychological Preparation in the Basketball Training Program: A Conceptualized Approach

The use of various psychological preparations in the different phases of the training program is described in the following section. More specifically, the operational foundations of the sport psychology consultation program; brief information on the players, the team, and the sport consultant; and the use of psychological preparation in each phase, particularly in the competition phase, are presented.

Operational Foundations of the Sport Psychology Consultation Program

A consultation approach has been developed, reflecting five principles that can be applied in both individual and team sports (see Blumenstein, 2001; Henschen, 2001; Lidor & Henschen, 2003). The objective of this approach is to enable the sport psychologist to consider the specific objectives of the physical, technical, and tactical preparations in each phase of the training program. The five principles are as follows:

- The sport psychologist should be one of the members of the professional staff who works on a regular basis with the individual athlete or the team. It is typical for the professional staff to be composed of a head coach, assistant coaches, a strength and conditioning coach, an athletic trainer, a sports
medicine physician, and a sport psychologist or sport consultant. Ideally, the sport psychologist should attend all staff meetings, practice sessions, and competitions or games.

• The sport psychologist should discuss his or her psychological plan with the coaching staff. Only after receiving full agreement from the head coach and his or her assistants can the sport psychologist begin the consultation process.

• The sport psychologist should meet with the coaching staff, the strength and conditioning coach, and the athletic trainer on a weekly basis in order to exchange ideas, experiences, and knowledge concerning the actual contribution of the components of the training program to the progress of the individual athlete or the team. The sport psychologist will then be able to use the fruits of these discussions in his or her applied work with the athlete or the team.

• The psychological consultation should be given in three settings: laboratory settings—the psychological techniques are taught in controlled and sterile conditions; practice sessions—the psychological techniques are used during actual practice; and home settings—the athlete practices the learned psychological techniques at home in a quiet and relaxed atmosphere.

• The sport psychologist should be available for consideration of any request coming from the coaching staff, the individual athlete, or the team. The sport psychologist should maintain an open-door approach in order to build a solid and professional relationship with the coaching staff, as well as with his or her main clients—the individual athlete and the team.

The Players and the Team

The players (males, \( n = 14 \), mean age = 25.2 years) were part of an elite team that played in Division 1 of the Israeli national league, as well as in one of the European leagues. There are five divisions of competitive basketball in Israel. Division 1 is the highest and is composed of 12 professional clubs. The players played for one club located in a large city.

The Consultant

The consultant (male, PhD in sport psychology, 30 years of experience working with elite athletes in individual [gymnastics, judo, and kayaking] and team [basketball and soccer] sports in the former Soviet Union and Israel) worked for the club on a 2-year contract. He provided psychological consultations to the players and the coaching staff. At the time he worked for the club he did not provide psychological services to any sports teams but only to individual athletes such as judokas and kayakers. According to his request, he was not introduced in the media as one of the professional staff working with the team. In addition to his applied work, the consultant taught one sport psychology class for undergraduate students at a physical education college and was also part of a research group conducting studies in sport and exercise psychology.
Psychological Preparation in Different Phases of the Training Program

The main objective of the annual training program for elite male basketball players was to prepare the players for the regular 60-game season. The program was composed of two cycles of preparation, competition, and transition phases, because there was a 3-week break in the middle of the season. During the midseason break there were no games scheduled for the European League and only two games for the national league. There were different objectives for each phase within each cycle and for the specific preparation in each phase. The intensity, load, and duration of training in each phase of each cycle were taken into consideration while conducting individual and team psychological sessions.

The Preparation Phase

During the preparation phase, which started in mid-July, most of the training time was devoted to physical and technical preparation. More specifically, players were engaged in strength training exercises, aerobic conditioning activities, technical practices, and skill repetitions (see Bompa, 1999). In the GP, two or three strength training sessions were held weekly in which the intensity of training was low and the volume of the regime was high. Two to four aerobic sessions (e.g., running) were administered to develop aerobic fitness, to enable the players’ bodies to better tolerate increases in lactate level, facilitate lactate removal, and enhance the rate of recovery. In the SP, practices consisted of anaerobic activity (e.g., 10- to 20-m sprints) and fine and gross coordination drills (e.g., ball handling, dribbling, passing, and shooting). Individual sessions were also conducted to enhance the technical skill level of each player. These sessions were conducted one player at a time, aimed at improving defensive and offensive skills. The tactical preparation focused on team defensive maneuvers and offensive plays that would be carried out during the upcoming games.

Two main types of psychological preparation were used during the preparation phase: individual (working on a one-on-one basis) and group (working with the whole team or a number of players). During the individual meetings, four aspects of psychological consultation were carried out by the sport psychologist. First, basic information on the players, such as personal and family background, was collected. Second, a few questionnaires (e.g., State-Trait Anxiety Inventory [STAI; Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1970] and Sport Competition Anxiety Test [SCAT; Martens, Vealey, & Burton, 1990]) were administered to the players. The selection of the STAI was recommended by the coach, who argued that basketball players are not only professional athletes but also, and mainly, individuals who face other challenges in life (e.g., family matters, schoolwork, and social interactions). Therefore, the coach wanted to obtain information on his players’ state and trait anxiety in general and not only in sport settings, as provided by the SCAT. It should be acknowledged that the sport psychologist was aware of the limitations of the STAI and SCAT questionnaires in accounting for the multidimensional...
nature of the competitive anxiety response; however, as indicated before, one of the operational foundations of the sport psychology program was that the sport consultant should discuss his psychological plan with the coaching staff. Therefore, the sport consultant preferred in this case to fulfill the head coach’s request. Third, a number of reaction-time and self-regulation tests (Blumenstein et al., 2005) were conducted. The knowledge obtained from these questionnaires and tests assisted the sport psychologist in planning psychological sessions with the players during more advanced stages of the preparation phase, as well as during the competition phase. Fourth, the players were provided with basic fundamental intervention techniques, such as goal setting, imagery, and focusing attention.

The main objective of the psychological techniques was to help the players cope effectively with the physical load they were exposed to during early practices of the preparation phase. Each player was taught how to set goals for the short- and long-term with respect to his own physical-conditioning level. For example, some of the short-term goals were to lose weight after returning from the transition phase and improve endurance so that more effort could be put into practices. Some of the long-term goals were to attend all strength and conditioning practices and maintain the intensity of training in order to be able to cope effectively with the physical demands of the upcoming season. Players were provided with relaxation guidance so they would be able to relax after the strength and conditioning workouts and be prepared for the upcoming practices. The players used imagery to rehearse the technical fundamentals that they practiced on the court—those they were familiar with and, particularly, ones that were new to them. In addition, imagery was used to help the players better understand their defensive and offensive roles on the team. Because the coach began developing defensive and offensive team concepts, the players were advised to visualize themselves performing their roles within these concepts in order to enhance tactical learning. While working with players who were already familiar with techniques such as imagery, the sport psychologist focused on the actual use of the technique in specific game situations. The sport psychologist and the players selected a number of game-related actions and then discussed how to effectively use the techniques needed in these actions. Among them were jump ball and free-throw shots.

Group sessions were conducted with the entire team or with a number of players. There were two objectives for the meetings with all the members of the team. The first objective was to provide them with general knowledge on central topics in sport psychology (e.g., developing attention focusing in free-throw shots). These topics were addressed in the format of a 30-min lecture, and at the end of the lecture a group discussion was held for about 20 min. The second objective was to develop team cohesion and leadership in basketball, mainly by team discussion and shared communication among the players.

The meetings with a number of players were held on the request of the coaching staff. For example, the sport psychologist conducted sessions with those players who demonstrated low motivation and a negative attitude in the strength and conditioning practices. An open discussion was held among these players and the sport psychologist, with new goals being set for each player. Another example was meeting with those players who had difficulty in remembering some of the team’s offensive plays. Imagery and attention-focusing techniques were used to help the players remember these plays. Self-talk was also used in these sessions. The players
were asked to imagine themselves moving on the court and performing the offensive
drills, while simultaneously loudly verbalizing the acts they were required to do, as well as those acts performed by their teammates.

In the sessions with the whole team or a group of players, the sport psycholo-
gist provided the players with examples reflecting concrete defensive and offensive
events occurring during practices. Because the sport psychologist was an integral
part of the professional staff working with the team, he attended practices and
games. Therefore, he was able to explain to the players how to use the psychologi-
cal technique (e.g., focusing attention) for their benefit in that particular event or
in related ones. By adopting this kind of approach, the psychological preparation
complemented the technical and tactical preparations.

Most of the psychological consultations were provided in individual sessions.
The sport psychologist conducted team sessions only when he focused on team
issues, such as team cohesion and goal setting for the whole team. Team processes
could only be developed effectively after each player was able to understand and
accept his role and status within the whole team, as well as to realize his individual
contribution to the team from both professional and social perspectives. The sport
psychologist observed the team as a group of individuals, each of whom had dif-
ferent attitudes, goals, and mentalities (Burke, 2006; Henschen, 2003, 2005), and
therefore each player and the coaches should be consulted individually.

During the preparation phase, the players were also provided with home
assignments so they could practice the psychological techniques in their free time.
Although these sessions were conducted in sterile settings, which decreased the
ecological validity of the psychological skill training, it was assumed that these
specific sessions would increase the players’ awareness of the appropriate use of
certain protocols of the learned psychological techniques. In addition, it was hoped
that they would help players to develop their own responsibility for mastering the
techniques when practicing the technical and tactical foundations of the game.

The Competition Phase

During the competition phase, the technical, tactical, and psychological preparations
played a major role. The main objective of this phase was to prepare the players
and the team for a specific game or games. Therefore, special attention was given
to developing tactical and psychological skills for the individual player and the
whole team. Only one session per week was devoted solely to physical preparation;
during this session the players were engaged in strength training. The objective
of the physical preparation in the competition phase (in both Cycles 1 and 2) was
to decrease the players’ vulnerability to injury and to help them overcome minor
injuries.

The main objective of the psychological preparation in the competition phase,
in both Cycles 1 and 2, was to help the players cope mentally with the heavy load
of games played in the national and the European leagues. More specifically, the
psychological preparation was directed at improving the resistance of players to
competitive stress, enhancing pregame routines, helping players remember tactical
plays, and developing total concentration and positive affirmations in the players
before and during the game. Daily sessions were conducted with individual players
or with the whole team. As in the preparation phase, players were also provided
in the competition phase with home assignments so that they could practice the psychological techniques in their free time. These sessions were related mainly to the tactical aspects of the game, and, therefore, players were instructed to use imagery.

In a typical week during the competition phase (in Cycles 1 and 2), the team was scheduled to play two games—one in the national league and the other in the European league. Therefore, during the competition phase the team was required to play about four games per month on the road. As a consequence, the team spent a great deal of time traveling, not only around the country but also abroad. In spite of the difficulties, psychological services were provided regularly throughout the competition phase. The sport psychologist established the weekly plan after discussing the goals with the coaching staff.

The psychological sessions were administered in two main forms: individual and group. The sport psychologist selected in advance the type of session and psychological techniques he would use. Any requests made by the coaching staff were taken into consideration, however. For example, the head coach planned to provide one of his centers with more playing time during the upcoming week. As a consequence, the sport psychologist was asked to spend more time with that player mentally preparing him for this challenge. In another case, the assistant coach felt that two of the team’s shooting guards had not cooperated with each other during the last several practices. The sport psychologist was asked to conduct a session in which the two players would participate to try to improve their communication. These examples reflect the use of psychological preparations taking into consideration the objectives of other preparations, such as the technical and tactical. Although these sessions were conducted off the court, the players were asked to relate to events that occurred on the court. It was assumed that communication skill training could be used as a psychological technique to strengthen some of the technical and tactical aspects of the game. For example, the players discussed an offensive play that the team failed to perform in the final 2 min of the last home game. Each of the players gave his opinion of why the offensive plan did not work out, and then pointed out what should be done the next time in order to perform it successfully. Then they were asked to imagine the play, emphasizing the correct way to execute it.

Some of the psychological techniques used during the competition phase in both the individual and team sessions had already been presented to the players during SP and GP. Among these techniques were imagery, concentration, and attention-focusing. Other psychological techniques, such as regulation exercises with Galvanic Skin Response Biofeedback and with Electromyography Biofeedback, were presented to the players for the first time during early stages of the competition phase. In essence, the use of regulation exercises began during the final two weeks of the preparation phase. Regulation exercises were used more in the competition phase because it took the sport psychologist a few weeks to create a “psychological profile” for each player. Only after assessing the psychological strengths and weaknesses of the players could the sport psychologist provide each player with a set of regulation exercises that matched his individual needs. The regulation exercise program using biofeedback apparatus was composed of psychological diagnosis, a self-regulation test, imagery, relaxation, and a self-analysis examination (for more details on the use of these regulation exercises see Blumenstein and Bar-Eli, 2005).
While working with the players, either in an individual session or a group session, the sport psychologist took into account the player’s physical state, current role on the team, and playing time in the games played in the national and European leagues. Examples of individual and group psychological sessions are presented next.

**Individual Psychological Training Sessions.** The individual training sessions were conducted with one player at a time in a separate room. The sessions were conducted either before or after practice and had two objectives. The first objective was to discuss with the player his thoughts and feelings about (a) the way he deals with the physical, technical, and tactical loads of the training program; (b) his level of performance in the previous national and European games; and (c) his psychological state at the current phase of the training program (e.g., attitude and motivation). The second objective was to present the player with an appropriate psychological technique to use for strengthening his psychological preparation.

The individual session was composed of three parts: beginning, basic work, and final work. Various procedures were implemented in each part to assess the player’s psychological state and to provide him with appropriate preparation techniques. For example, in one session the sport psychologist consulted one of the substitute centers of the team. After an analysis of his physical and psychological states at that stage of the competition phase, a psychological program was developed specifically for him. In this example, the session focused on concentration and attention-focusing exercises using Galvanic Skin Response Biofeedback relaxation-excitation waves, and imagery using a video camera recorder. The individual session ended with a few minutes of relaxation techniques. This was a typical individual psychological session in the competition phase in terms of the structure and length of the session and the psychological techniques practiced.

Emphasis was made in the individual sessions, as well as in some of the group sessions on helping the players learn the tactical plays. In the competition phase, different tactical plays were introduced on a weekly basis by the coach. The sport psychologist used imagery to help the players effectively remember these tactical plays. In a typical session, imagery was practiced, accompanied by video simulations. The video was prepared by one of the assistant coaches; it showed players performing the team’s offensive or defensive tactical plays. The players watched parts of the video for a short period of time, and then they imagined the plays. Some of the players were instructed to also use a self-talk technique in order to help them create a more vivid picture of the new tactical plays.

**Group Psychological Training Sessions.** The main objectives of the group sessions were to develop a positive team approach and facilitate team building (Estabrooks & Dennis, 2003; Eys, Patterson, Loughead, & Carron, 2005). The sport psychologist emphasized the goals set for the team from the physical, technical, and tactical perspectives. In addition, he stressed the differences between individual and team goals. An interpersonal-relations approach (Estabrooks & Dennis) was used to stress the importance of cohesion among the players, particularly in the competition phase of the training program.

In the group mental-training sessions the sport psychologist consulted the whole team or a number of players at one time. The selection of the players for the group session was made either on the request of the coaching staff or the decision of the sport psychologist. There were various reasons for the players’ selection for
a group session. Among them were (a) players had similar roles on the team (e.g.,
similar offensive positions—point guards, shooting guards, and centers) and, thus,
were required to cope with similar psychological barriers during the game; (b)
several players were selected to lead the team in the upcoming games, so needed
additional psychological preparation; and (c) players shared a similar psychological
state (e.g., low self-confidence, lack of attention-focusing, low motivation) and,
therefore, similar psychological interventions were required. As in the individual
sessions, the group sessions were conducted either before or after practice in a
separate room.

The group session was composed of the same three parts as the individual
session (beginning, basic work, and final work). The physical and psychological
assessments conducted during the beginning part of the session reflected the current
state of all participating players. Each player was asked to share his thoughts and
feelings about their practices and games during the previous week of the training
program. In addition, all the players were encouraged by the sport psychologist to
respond to their teammates’ reflections.

In the group sessions an emphasis was made on helping the players cope
effectively with the tactical load placed on them during practices and games. For
example, in a typical group session the sport psychologist met with a number of
players who played similar positions on the team (e.g., centers). All these play-
ers performed imagery and then discussed what role they could play in order to
improve the team’s decision-making processes in both defense and offense. In one
case, the players discussed the principles of the particular zone defense that they
had performed in their previous games. They realized that they did not perform
this defense well enough because they could not stop the opponent from scoring.
Some of the players outlined the errors they made during these games. They were
critical of themselves, but also asked for better cooperation from their teammates.
At one point in the group discussion the players imagined themselves perform-
ing the zone defense, stressing the key individual and team elements of how to
effectively carry it out. The sport psychologist maintained an open team-discussion
approach; all players could express themselves and exchange ideas. This approach
was unique to the psychological sessions and presumably could not occur during
regular practices and games.

In one session, for example, the sport psychologist worked with four players
(guards) as per the head coach’s request. All players demonstrated a slight decrement
in their defensive and offensive performances during the previous two games played
in the European league. This also illustrates a typical group psychological session
in the competition phase. The sport psychologist, however, can change the order of
the psychological exercises in each part according to his or her preference.

The session focused on concentration and attention-focusing exercises using
four portable Galvanic Skin Response Biofeedback, with an emphasis on visualization
exercises of offensive plays and defensive maneuvers. These exercises were
conducted under three different settings: sterile—the players worked on their own
without being exposed to any external interference; competitive—the players were
asked to compete with each other in completing their assignments as rapidly and
accurately as possible; and distracted—the players performed while being exposed
to noisy conditions. The group session ended with a few minutes of relaxation.
The Transition Phase

During the transition period of Cycle 1, the players were given a 10-day break during which no team practices were scheduled. It was requested of the players, however, that they keep to their practice schedule in order to maintain the level of their field and free-throw shooting. In addition, some of the players were provided with psychological services during the break, mainly in individual settings. A different approach was taken during the transition period in Cycle 2, in which the training load was decreased substantially for all players (Bompa, 1999). The players were directed to be active not more than two or three times per week. They were asked not to play basketball, but they were allowed to participate in other sports, such as mini-soccer, golf, and tennis. Some of the players were asked to continue with their psychological consultations in order to further develop basic psychological skills such as imagery and focusing attention.

Evaluation, Psychological Reflections, and Practical Tips

Based on our experience of implementing this psychological preparation in team (basketball) and individual (judo; see Blumenstein et al., 2005) sports, we would like to suggest three ways of evaluating a program’s success and three practical tips for professional practice. For the evaluative process, both objective and subjective measures can be used by the sport consultant. One of the most important objective measures in sport for evaluation of success is the final place or ranking of the athlete or team. In our case, the team was ranked fifth at the end of the season, the highest place ever achieved by the team in Division 1. In addition, some statistical measures related to the team’s performance improved during the period of time that the sport consultant provided the players with psychological interventions. For example, improvements were recorded during game performances in free-throw shots, 2-point shots, and 3-point shots.

Two subjective measures can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. The first is the consistency of the psychological preparation provided to some the players over several years by the sport consultant. In our case, a few of the young players (n = 5) on the team had also played for Israeli national teams that took second place in the 2002 and 2004 European Basketball Championships for players up to the age of 22. The same sport consultant had worked with these teams and had used psychological preparations similar to the ones described in this article and, therefore, had worked consistently with these five players for several years. The second measure is the support given to the psychological program by the parents of the young players on the team. The young players who played for the club at the time the sport psychologist provided his psychological support reported that their parents encouraged them to participate in the individual sessions conducted by the consultant. They believed that his psychological advice could be used by their children not only on the basketball court but also in daily life.

Three practical tips are suggested for the sport consultant. First, the sport consultant has to focus on what he or she is capable of doing best. According to our view, sport consultants cannot administer every one of the psychological techniques available in the literature; they should use their experience, expertise, and professional knowledge to develop the ideal psychology program that will
help the individual athlete or the team achieve their best. In our program, the sport consultant used mostly mental skills techniques, such as the ones we described. The sport consultant had been trained how to use these techniques, and he continued to develop them throughout many years of professional practice.

Second, the psychological program should be systematic and correspond to the other components of the training program, with any modifications and refinements conforming to the conceptual framework of the training program. The psychological preparation should be part of the daily, weekly, and monthly training routine and be linked to the physical, technical, and tactical preparations in the particular phase of the annual training program.

Third, individual psychological sessions should be a major vehicle of communication between the sport consultant and the athletes, coaches, and team managers, not only in individual sports but also in team sports. Individual sessions should be used regularly in order to mentally prepare each athlete according to his or her psychological profile. When required, the sport psychologist should gather the team together and conduct a group psychological session. In addition, the sport consultant should not hesitate to provide the elite athletes with home assignments in order to enable them to practice the psychological techniques in sterile settings, as well.

Our aim in this article was to demonstrate how various psychological preparations can be used during an annual training program for elite basketball players, at the same time taking into consideration the specific objectives of the other training preparations. Such a conceptualized psychological program cannot be fully assessed by empirical inquiries, however. Therefore, methodological and practical perspectives that can provide evidence for the effectiveness of such a program should be obtained through interviews with the players and the coaching staff.

References


