Some Clinical Aspects of Sport Psychology

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More emphasis has been placed on physical fitness and athletic activity in the last decade than at any other time in history. Health and physical fitness have become an important part of educational programs. A natural outgrowth of this is much greater competition. Pop Warner leagues in football, little leagues in baseball, sports participation from junior high school through college, and professional teams—all emphasize intense competition. In many leagues the attitude is “survival of the fittest.” Simply participating is no longer the goal; competition—or more specifically—winning, is. The adage, “It doesn’t matter whether you win or lose but how you play the game that counts,” appears to have been replaced. The now famous quote of Vince Lombardi, coach of the Washington Redskins, seems to have taken its place. “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing” seems to be our national theme (Kramer, 1968).

With emphasis on fierce competition and winning, the pressures on school administrators, physical education departments, and coaches have become greater than at any other period. Graduate and alumni clubs expecting successful athletic teams have placed a burden on the above-mentioned groups.

At the same time that competition has been on the increase, a change has occurred in the attitude of the nation’s youth, the individuals who must actively compete. Rather than being handled as a group, they wish to be handled individually and, moreover, to have a greater voice in what is said. One of the studies conducted at our Institute for the Study of Athletic Motivation (ISAM) indicated that 71 per cent of over 500 athletes on a high school, college, and professional level expressed this feeling. A strong desire also exists for a more active part in the functioning of the teams. This is in direct opposition to the traditional approach to coaching where the team is treated as a group.

What is even more revealing in our data is that the athletes wished to be treated in a mature, straightforward manner as intelligent and perceptive
individuals. In many cases, this is far from the traditional coaching techniques of very strict discipline, rough, tough, hard nose coaching where the weak athletes are weeded out and the tough athletes browbeaten to make them tougher "men."

These changes have been particularly hard on the individual responsible for developing athletes—the coach. In a series of articles in *Sports Illustrated* entitled "The Desperate Coach" (Underwood, 1969), the problems confronting coaches today were clearly spelled out. The old coaching philosophy is not only being objected to but actively rebelled against by the athletes. The end result has been poorer performances and poorer teams.

The coach is in a very difficult predicament. His training and background have been in the old school. There are few if any opportunities for him to learn about individual differences. He must rely upon experience and ideas derived from many years of trial and error. Even if a coach would like to know more about the sensitive handling of athletes, there are few if any schools in the United States where he could receive instruction regarding individual differences in athletics, motivation, team cohesion, athletic teaching, and minority athletes. Athletics and physical education departments are not equipped to handle such an area. Also, instructors for such courses are not available. The author had the opportunity to teach a course in the psychology of athletics several years ago and found the demand overwhelming. Coaches are very conscientious, dedicated, and, in most cases, more than willing to pursue this area.

Few would dispute that the most neglected aspect of athletics is the clinical area; yet it plays a vital part in performance. It is very difficult to get the advantage of any opponent in terms of strategy, equipment, or facilities since these are available to all. In addition, the spread of talent is usually equal in most leagues; thus, this is rarely a biasing factor. The only remaining untapped and relatively untouched area is the psychology of athletics. Growing interest in this area indicates that in the not-too-distant future this too will be an acceptable part of athletics.

A puzzling aspect of the psychology of sports is the unanswered question of why some coaches are able to produce winners by handling athletes individually while others are not. It is doubtful that dramatic personality reformations in the coach can be accomplished which will make him become more effective. We can, however, explore those aspects which seem related to effective coaching and hope that the individual coach will be able to develop his own techniques.

To understand any aspect of athletic effectiveness, we must begin with the coach. How he performs his role depends upon his personality type. His needs, wishes, philosophy, and attitude are invariably reflected in the team. All of the forces impinging upon him clinically are inevitably reflected in team performance. "The Role of the
Coach in the Motivation of Athletes” (Tutko, T. A. and Ogilvie, B. C., 1967), in a book edited by Slovenko and Knight, points out the many roles the coach must perform. He must be an athletic expert (in his sport), a general or master strategist, a public relations man, a salesman of sorts, recruiter, counselor or solver of team problems, father figure, and a motivator of his team. These are all carried out in the framework of his own personality. The most unique contribution he makes to his team is the exposure to his personality type. This alone may have a lifelong influence on the athletes under him.

Three essential clinical areas influencing athletic performances are often overlooked by coaches.

The first of these would seem basic but is the most frequently overlooked. Why is the athlete participating? What does participation mean to him? Most coaches assume the athlete enjoys participation and is voluntarily giving up his time to sports. This assumption is made because the coach, himself, is generally in athletics for this reason. Clinical work has revealed that in a majority of cases where the athlete poses a problem he is participating for reasons other than love of the sport. He may be doing it to gain the love and attention of a father who did not make it with the Cincinnati Reds. Thus, the boy is in little leagues or, perhaps, even the major leagues. He would rather be in some other profession but paternal pressures are too great and he would be ostracized from the family if he did not play baseball.

The end result is that he gives a half-hearted effort or he is terrified of doing poorly. He may, in fact, be rebellious to the coach rather than his father. The end result is that the coach may be getting gray hair, becoming bald, or developing an ulcer because some athletes would prefer not being on the playing field. This fact was first brought to the attention of the author when doing some interviews at a professional football camp several years ago. An athlete who was a very high draft choice was asked why he was quitting after two weeks. The coaches agreed that he had all of the natural talent necessary to become a great professional player. Moreover, motivational tests revealed qualities supporting the coaches’ beliefs. When asked why he decided to leave camp his reply was simple, “I don’t like football—never have.” His reasons for participating were that his father had encouraged him and he received an education via scholarships. He had come to camp because he was promised a certain amount of money if he stayed two weeks. His real interest was medicine and he planned to use the money to enroll in medical school.

There are many different reasons for participation. The athlete may want the education or the money; he may be trying to impress a girlfriend or become popular. He may like the prestige or he may just like the fellowship. At times the reasons may not be healthy from a psychological viewpoint. Deep seated feelings of inadequacy, sadistic or masochistic tendencies, or the desire to break away from
the apron strings and create havoc are not uncommon reasons. We refer to these athletes as "compensatory" athletes because they are trying to compensate for some important need by sports participation. Without a knowledge of these reasons, the coach may find himself confronted with a very perplexing problem, and may, in fact, contribute to the underlying difficulty. By having some idea of the reason for participation, the coach is often in a position to handle the athlete in a more effective way.

A second clinical area to which the coach must respond in working with each athlete contains the motivational forces that enhance or detract from attaining athletic efficiency. Work at the ISAM is concentrated on assessing the athlete's motivation in order to help the coach understand where the athlete needs support in becoming a more effective player. Over the past seven years, standard personality tests have been given to determine the individual differences in motivation. Coaches are then advised on handling procedures to help each athlete realize his maximum potential. These tests have been administered to over 10,000 athletes during this time and work done with over 1,000 coaches and assistant coaches. Recently, the Athletic Motivation Inventory (AMI) has been developed to assess aspects of athletic motivation which affect performance. Work has revealed several salient traits which influence athletic productivity. These traits fall into two major categories: desire and emotionality. Desire is made up of five separate traits. They include:

- **Drive**: wanting to be a winner and successful, setting high goals, and being competitive.
- **Aggression**: willing to assert oneself, standing one's ground in adversity, and enjoying physical combat.
- **Determination**: working hard at a goal, stick-to-itiveness, and putting in long hours of work.
- **Leadership**: accepting the responsibility of leading others, speaking out, and taking charge of difficult tasks.
- **Organization**: preferring schedules, responding to details, and developing plans.

Emotionality has to do with the emotional make-up of the athlete and is vital in the effective handling of the athlete on a personal basis. The seven traits involved here are:

- **Coachability**: respect for authority, accepting the coach's philosophy, and willingness to respond to the coach's plan.
- **Self-Confidence**: belief in one's ability and reliance on one's talent and faith to influence the outcome of an athletic contest.
- **Emotional Maturity**: control of one's feelings, mature and stable behavior under stressful circumstances.
- **Conscience Development**: accepts rules without rebelling, places good of team above personal needs, and is personally responsible.
- **Trust**: accepts teammates, not suspicious, and gets along well with others.
- **Guilt Proneness**: looks to himself to correct errors, takes blame, tries to improve, and rarely blames others.
- **Mental Toughness**: able to take
tough coaching, does not get upset easily when corrected, and does not need too much encouragement.

All athletes possess each of these traits to some degree. The more numerous the traits possessed by an athlete, the fewer the problems the coach is likely to face. Given enough time, most coaches are able to assess these traits. However, by the time the coach is able to do so, it is often too difficult a problem to handle. The coach is often at a disadvantage in not knowing the individual athlete ahead of time. A problem that often interferes with the coach personally assessing these traits is that he is often biased by the athlete’s talent. If a boy is extremely talented, the coach feels he possesses all of these qualities. If he is not talented, the coach may see him as having fewer. As a result the coach often works under a false assumption only to find out that the boy is not performing up to par. For example, the coach may feel the athlete is very confident simply because he has all the physical tools to perform. He may be puzzled when he does not produce. He may begin pushing him during practice. If the boy is low on emotional maturity and not mentally tough, his performance will drop even more dramatically. The coach subsequently becomes even more concerned and pushes harder. The end result can be a completely ineffective athlete.

If the athlete had been tested, sensitive handling and support would have been prescribed. This suggestion, based on clinical observation as well as test results, might have helped him perform more effectively. If the athlete was supported and was successful, it would have helped him gain confidence. Ideally, he would be able to reach his potential. In such a case, sensitive clinical handling may not only help the athlete but have a pronounced effect on the team. If several athletes on a team were dealt with in a similar fashion, the results could be dramatic.

The third and final clinical consideration is the awareness of personal problems that may be somewhat psychopathological. The symptoms manifested by athletes result from the way in which the individual athlete handles extreme anxiety. Few nonathletes face the same type of stress that an athlete faces. At the core of this is the realistic consideration that it is entirely possible to be killed while participating in a number of sports. Being hit on the head by a fast-thrown baseball or tackled very hard in football can result in severe physical damage if not death. This alone can create great anxiety. Demonstrating one’s talent before a large group of people adds further anxiety. Finally, the pressure to win poses another. If the differing circumstances of the game such as a championship game or the crucial final seconds of a close game are added, it is easy to see that athletic contests are a source of extreme anxiety.

Each athlete learns to cope with anxiety. The most common way is to become more active. As a result, many behaviors are apt to appear extreme to the average individual. Many observers are led to believe all athletes
are somewhat "strange" or "kooky." Results indicate nothing could be further from the truth. Athletes as a group showed control and maturity far above the average population, regardless of the group to which they were compared. There are, however, notable exceptions. They are just that—exceptions, not the rule. Because they are athletes, however, such exceptions are more apt to be publicized, thus, the general impression that athletes are a bit odd.

Detecting problems is somewhat difficult for the coach who is untrained in psychopathology. Of more concern, however, is the fact that the coach is at a loss to know how to deal with these situations. A book entitled Problem Athletes and How to Handle Them (Ogilvie and Tutko, 1966) does attempt to outline the most common problems and the etiological factors causing them and how the coach may be able to detect and work effectively with such problems. Some of these mentioned include the rebellious athlete, the con man, the hyperanxious or the psyched-out athlete, the success-phobic athlete, the injury-prone athlete, the withdrawn athlete, and the depression-prone athlete.

Serious difficulties invariably arise because of problems stemming from childhood. The athlete has not learned how to deal with anxiety in a productive way. The manifestations of these problems will hold true not only in his athletic career but throughout life. Some coaches take it upon themselves to try to deal with these problems and often become parental surrogates. This may be the only time in the athlete's life that someone has been willing to help him. If successful, the athlete and coach will have attained something far beyond athletic achievement. If unsuccessful, it may be a very serious setback for both. Far more training and understanding will be necessary before coaches are able to deal with such problems. In many instances the coach is wise in suggesting that the athlete seek professional help.

These are just a few of the clinical areas that the coach must face each day. It is a tribute to those working with athletes that they have done as well as they have. The work done by coaches, their assistants, and teammates often provides the strength to help an individual pull through an emotional crisis.

Although new, sports psychology is becoming recognized as a necessary element in the athletic world. In time, teams will employ individuals to assist in this most needed area.

REFERENCES