CHAPTER 18

Applied Sport Psychology for the Strength and Conditioning Coach

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OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

• Understand that the strength and conditioning coach cannot directly motivate athletes.
• Realize that the weight room is an appropriate place for athletes to develop and practice their mental game.
• Set goals.
• Help athletes control their arousal levels.
• Differentiate between a confident athlete and an athlete who is not.
• Notice that most aspects of sports psychology are athlete driven.

KEY TERMS

Achievement Motivation
Broad External Focus
Broad Internal Focus
Concentration
Confidence
Direction of Effort
Emotions
Goal Ladder
Individual Zone of Optimal Functioning (IZOF)
Instructional Self-Talk
Intensity of Effort
Interactional View
Inverted-U Hypothesis

Motivation
Narrow External Focus
Narrow Internal Focus
Negative Self-Talk
Participant-Centered View
Positive Self-Talk
Process-Based Goals
Product-Based Goals
Routine
Self-Talk
Shifting
Situation-Centered View
SMART Goals
Superstition
Introduction

The primary goal of any strength and conditioning coach or personal trainer is to effectively improve athletic performance and fitness using proper strength and conditioning techniques, drawing from the scientific fields of anatomy, exercise physiology, biomechanics, and nutrition. Effective practitioners will be skilled in program design, be adept in the teaching, reinforcement and monitoring of exercise technique, be familiar and comfortable with physical testing and evaluation, and have a variety of organizational and administrative skills (1). The addition of a working understanding of concepts from the field of sport and performance psychology may assist the coach or trainer in the attainment of this primary goal.

It has been argued that the role of sport psychology is to “help athletes achieve more consistent levels of performance at or near their physical potential by carefully managing their physical resources through appropriate psychological strategies and techniques” (2). A basic understanding of these strategies and techniques may help the strength and conditioning coach encourage more consistent effort in the weight room, generate better composure and ability to deal with distractions during workouts, and foster more motivated and confident athletes.

The scientific discipline of sport psychology generally has three major goals: (a) observing and measuring psychological phenomena; (b) investigating the relationship between psychological variables and performance; and (c) applying this theoretical knowledge in performance settings to improve overall athletic performance (2). Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to focus on the last of these goals, with the aim of helping you—the strength and conditioning coach—effectively integrate some critical sport psychology skills and situational cues into your training programs with the aim of improving your athlete’s overall training and performance.

MOTIVATION

As a strength and conditioning coach, you may often find yourself wondering why some athletes you work with seem highly motivated and constantly strive for success in the weight room and on the field of play, whereas others seem to lack this motivation, appearing to simply “Go through the motions” during workouts, practices, and performance situations. Understanding motivation will probably be the most important psychological construct you will need as a strength coach, but it is also one you have little direct control over. You cannot motivate your athletes, but you can help them to better motivate themselves.

Motivation can be defined simply as the intensity and direction of one’s effort (3). It is an inner condition that initiates, directs, and sustains a person’s behaviors. Direction of effort refers to whether an individual will seek out, approach, or be attracted to certain situations (4). For example, an athlete might be attracted to the weight room because he or she understands the relationship between training and sport performance. Along the same lines, an athlete might avoid the weight room because he or she does not enjoy the feeling of fatigue that often results from a hard workout. Both of these examples refer to the direction or one’s effort—either toward the weight room or away from it. Intensity of effort refers to how much effort a person puts forth in a particular situation (4). For example, an athlete may attend daily workout sessions, but not put forth much effort during that workout. On the other hand, an athlete may only have a short period of access to the training facility yet make the most of every minute. This intensity is an indicator of motivation. Direction and intensity of effort are generally very closely related as those who are drawn to an activity (direction) will often put forth effort in that activity...
(intensity), and conversely, those who seem lackadaisical about their workouts, often do not have much attraction to the activity in the first place.

Because motivation is “an inner condition,” it is not something that you as the coach can give to your athletes. You cannot motivate someone else. However, you may be able to influence them in such a way that they can better motivate themselves.

APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATION

Although motivation is something that works differently for everyone, most people can conceptualize how their own motivated behavior comes from a combination of three different orientations. These are the participant-centered view, the situation-centered view, and the interactional view. The participant-centered view (sometimes called the trait-centered view) contends that motivated behavior is predominantly a function of individual characteristics, like a person’s personality, goals, or needs. Individual characteristics are what determine how motivated a person will be in any given situation. This could, for example, describe those who seem to excel in all areas of their lives. The situation-centered view (sometimes called the state-centered view), however, is in direct contrast to this. This view argues that a person’s motivation is primarily determined by the situations in which he or she finds himself or herself. You can likely think of situations where you would describe yourself as highly motivated, but others where your motivation is lacking. You are still the same person, but now the situation is different. The reality though is that while there may be some personality characteristics that influence your motivation, and you find yourself motivated in some situations but not others, most of us would generally argue that our motivated behaviors are a function of both our traits (who we are) and our states (how we feel at the moment, in the environment we find ourselves). Therefore, the view of motivation most widely accepted is the interactional view. The interactional view of motivation contends that “motivation results neither solely from participant factors nor solely from situational factors” (4). Rather, the best way to understand motivation is to consider both the person and the situation and how these two interact.

The best way to understand motivated behavior is to consider both the person and the situation and examine how these two factors interact with each other.

ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION

As a strength coach, understanding that your athletes all participate in their respective sports for different reasons, approach the training expectations for their sports in different ways, and experience motivation for these activities differently, will be critical in enhancing the level of service you can provide. To best tailor your services to the motivations of each athlete, an understanding of what specifically motivates them to act or behave in certain ways is needed. One construct that has emerged from the sport psychology literature to help with this is achievement motivation.

Achievement motivation refers to a person’s orientation to strive for task success, persist in the face of failure, and experience pride in accomplishments (5). It is an understanding of this motivation that gives the coach insight into an athlete’s desire and willingness to strive for excellence and under what circumstances he or she is willing to do so. As strength coaches, knowing if athletes are motivated to achieve success, even if there is a likelihood of failing, tells us a lot about those athletes. It tells us that these athletes will challenge themselves. They will put in the extra effort to be sure they are getting the most out of every workout, even if they are not seeing immediate results. They will experience a sense of pride when they accomplish goals they have set for themselves, and they will not overly berate themselves when they fail, because they recognize that they have given their all.

Similarly, being able to recognize an athlete who is motivated to avoid failure is also beneficial for the strength coach. While these concepts may sound the same, achieving success and avoiding failure from a motivational perspective are very different. Based on outward behaviors, the athlete motivated to avoid failure may look very similar to the one motivated to achieve success; however, an athlete motivated to avoid failure generally pushes himself or herself for very different reasons. This is a person who strives to avoid situations where failure can be internally attributed. Such athletes will push themselves in the weight room if they perceive that they have the ability to be successful—not because they want to experience the success, but because they do
not want to be held accountable for failing. If they perceive a training goal as highly challenging, they will not even make the attempt, because they do not want to take the risk of failing. For these athletes, motivation comes not from a desire to be successful, but more from a desire to protect the ego. They will appear motivated in environments where they can be successful because if they are successful, the ego is safe. However, they may just as likely take on tasks with a very low probability of success, because if they then fail, the ego is still protected—the attitude being that they weren’t supposed to be successful in the first place, so why not give it a shot? These athletes will embrace simple tasks and impossible tasks but shy away from anything truly challenging.

Motive to avoid failure is not about avoiding failure—it is about avoiding situations where failure can be attributed internally. It is about protecting one’s ego.

Athletes with a motive to succeed will generally focus on the pride and confidence they experience when they are successful. They will often say that things within their control, like high effort and skill, account for their success. When they do fail, they often feel a sense of guilt, because they believe that they have it in their power to do better. On the other hand, athletes with a motive to avoid failure will more often focus on the sense of shame or worry that they experience when they are unsuccessful. They often attribute their failure to things outside of their control, like luck, bad officiating, or the skill of the other team. When they are successful, they will generally feel a sense of relief and feel grateful because they have managed to protect their ego. Paying attention to how your athletes explain or attribute their success and failure and observing their emotional reactions to these situations can tell you a lot about their achievement motivation.

GOAL SETTING

One effective tool for enhancing motivation is by setting and achieving goals we set for ourselves. Additionally, setting goals can provide direction, give feedback, and foster a sense of support as one works toward the attainment of a task. Effective goal setting produces a number of beneficial behavioral changes including more productive training and practice sessions generally resulting in more focused competition behavior.

The weight room is a great place to encourage goal setting. This is one location where the athlete has the most control over his or her own performance and is a place he or she spends concentrated amounts of time. Potential areas in strength and conditioning where goal setting might prove effective include learning appropriate lifting technique and skill refinement, improving overall strength and/or endurance, targeting specific performance markers (i.e., one-repetition maximums [1-RMs], jump heights, sprint times), developing “quality practice” behaviors, and dealing with distractions.

Goal setting can provide direction, enhance motivation, give feedback on progress, and foster a sense of support when used effectively.

PROCESS VERSUS PRODUCT GOALS

There is much discussion within the field of sport psychology about the most effective way to structure or create goal statements. Many have argued that performers should focus more on creating and reinforcing process-based goals, or goals that are centered in the present, rather than product-based goals, or those that focus more on an outcome. The idea behind this supposition is that if one effectively works toward attaining process-based goals, the probability of achieving the desired outcomes or results correspondingly increases. The outcomes will take care of themselves. Others have stated, however, that in sport settings, the outcome is what really matters, so shouldn’t the goal statement then reflect this?

The reality is that every athlete is different. Some are highly motivated by the outcome or product-focused goal, using that to drive their daily behaviors—the proverbial carrot before the horse. Others may be distracted by the product goal, as it is something outside of the present. It is something “out there” and not what I need to be thinking about right now. Some find that outcome-focused goals elevate anxiety, as athletes are fixating on something not entirely within their control. As the coach, understanding how your athletes respond to different types of goal structures and how those varying goal statements help or hinder overall performance can assist you in better structuring your program designs to coincide with that athlete’s tendencies.
Both process- and product-based goals can be effective at providing direction and motivating an athlete; however, process-based goals raise the probability that the desired outcomes will occur.

**EFFECTIVE STRUCTURE**

As the strength coach, you are contributing to, if not fully creating, the daily, weekly, monthly, seasonal, and yearly fitness goals for every athlete on the teams with which you work. As you design the training programs for these athletes, you may choose to discuss with them the rationales behind the plans you generate. Your training plans are in essence a description of the goals you have for these athletes. They fill one main purpose of goal setting: providing direction. Your training programs give athletes the direction they need, every day, week, or month, to attain the long-term strength, fitness, power, or endurance plans you have for them. When athletes take these training programs and begin to implement them, they may wish to create additional goal statements that correspond to the training plan. These goal statements may serve a variety of purposes, including the development of motivation, the enhancement of confidence, and the satisfaction and sense of pride that comes from success.

**Goal Ladders**

There is a Chinese proverb that states, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” This idea applies well to the creation of effective goals. Many of us can clearly list a number of long-term goals we have for ourselves—win the championship, get that great job, get an “A” in that class, etc. An understanding of the long-term goal likely also applies to the athletes in your weight room as well (bench x-number of pounds, jump this high, get my $V_{O_{2max}}$ to here, etc.). The long-term goal is often easy to conceptualize. It is the understanding of where to go from there—the single steps—that can be challenging. This is where “goal ladders” can be helpful.

Goal ladders are simply conceptual diagrams that outline the steps needed to attain the desired long-term goal. If, for example, the long-term goal for one of your athletes is to improve his or her front squat 1-RM, you will likely have a plan in your head for how you will progressively train that athlete to attain this outcome goal. It is unlikely that you would expect to see improvement in this skill without creating a strategic, periodized training plan that progressively outlines what the athlete will do today, this week, this month, and this season to attain this goal. Goal ladders are specific to the goal for which they are created, but generally follow a structure that includes a series of short-term, medium-range, and long-term goals that all lead to the final outcome goal. Therefore, if the long-term goal is to improve one’s 1-RM by 5% by the end of this microcycle, an evaluation of several medium-range and short-term goals must occur. What needs to happen in order for me to improve by 5%? What can I do this week to improve the likelihood of that? What can I do today to take a step toward this? What can I do in this set? The purpose of each goal ladder is to give the performer something he or she can do right now that will take him or her one step closer to that long-term goal.

**Goal Ladders are conceptual diagrams that show the progression of goal development along the path toward achieving the long-term goal.**

**SMART Goals**

The acronym SMART has often been used to guide people in the effective formation of their goal statements. The letters stand for the following:

- **S**—Specific—Goals need to be written or conceptualized behaviorally in that they must provide specific guidelines on what to do or think or feel right now. The goal, “I will train with intensity” may sound good, but what does it really mean? What does “with intensity” look like? Rather, “I will focus on proper body alignment in every squat repetition I perform in practice today” is a more effective goal statement.

- **M**—Measurable—How will you know if you have attained a desired goal if there is no way to determine its attainment? Effective goals should have some way of establishing success or failure built into their wording. At the end of your workout, you should be able to look at your goal statements and definitively determine if you have met them.

- **A**—Attainable—Goals should be challenging, but attainable. If goals are set “too easy,” there is no sense of accomplishment generated when success is attained. If the goal for today’s practice is simply, “Complete every repetition indicated in my training plan for...”
today's workout," and this is an athlete who regularly completes training sessions in full, there is no motivation, reward, or feedback to be garnered from this goal statement.

- R—Realistic—Though goals must be challenging, they cannot be unreachable. If I am an athlete just coming off a lower back injury, and my goal for today's practice is to complete a set of dead lifts at my preinjury weight, I am clearly not going to attain my goal. If goals are set "too hard," the likelihood of failure is high and will thus have a tendency to be demotivating.

- T—Time Framed—Give yourself a time frame to accomplish your goals. Having a specific window for completion of your goal gives you motivation and structure that may be lacking otherwise. This guideline also corresponds to the "Attainable" and "Realistic" descriptors as well.

ENERGY AND AROUSAL MANAGEMENT

As explained earlier in this book, an understanding of how the human body creates energy to fuel various processes is critical for any effective strength and conditioning coach. As Chandler and Arnold stated in Chapter 1 (Bioenergetics), "human movement requires energy, and energy is vital for athletic performance." Though they were talking specifically about bioenergetics from a physiological perspective, the reality is that in order for athletes to perform effectively, they also need to effectively manage their mental energy.

Mental energy is generated, maintained, depleted, and refreshed via our emotions. Emotions are strong feelings, having both physical and psychological manifestations that serve to energize behaviors. These energy-impacting emotions can have both beneficial and detrimental effects on human performance, often depending on how a person interprets them. Emotions are beneficial to performance when they get us excited, cause us to feel motivated, elevate confidence in ourselves, and push us to challenge ourselves in performance. Emotion can be detrimental, however, when there is too much or too little (a performer being too "amped up" or "too flat") or when we lose control of our emotions and cease to function effectively in a performance environment (i.e., an athlete who cannot control his or her anger or frustration).

Emotions are generators of mental energy and can be beneficial or detrimental to performance depending on how a person interprets them.

FACTORS AFFECTING MENTAL ENERGY

Athletes often pay the most attention to their mental energy levels when it comes time for competition; however, it is also important to recognize how

Q & A from the Field

Q I coach a lot of different athletes and don't really have time to sit down with each one more than once a season to discuss their training goals. How can I effectively monitor how they are progressing?

—DI College Strength and Conditioning Coach

A Providing feedback to your athletes need not be an overly time-consuming process. If you meet with your athletes individually at the start of the season, you can have a discussion about the various fitness and performance goals that athlete will have. If you can periodically review these goals, perhaps just a few each week, you can focus on providing encouragement and support to those athletes at that time. You may also encourage your athletes to share their goals with other members of the team, so they may continually encourage each other and hold each other accountable. Lastly, if you are able to publicly reward or acknowledge athletes who are making respectable progress toward their goals, you will likely find that your athletes' motivation improves, thereby reinforcing the process without you having to do much.
these energy levels affect performance in practice and training conditions as well. Helping your athletes understand what things “drain their battery” prior to beginning their training sessions can help mitigate potential injury. Helping them understand what things “charge their battery” can generate more motivated, focused workouts. This “charging and draining” of one’s proverbial battery is simply a way of understanding how arousal levels impact performance. Athletes who are unable to effectively regulate their arousal levels may find themselves experiencing decreases in performance, as well as increased stress and worry. In order to perform at one’s best, athletes need to recognize what factors contribute to the most ideal arousal levels for their performances.

A simple tool for evaluating what factors impact your athletes’ arousal levels is to have them reflect on what their best performance felt like. Ask them to describe the circumstances of that day, including things like their nutrition, rest, and other physical and mental demands they may have been facing. Then have them compare that to their worst performance (or any day where they felt particularly “off”). What factors were different? What were the same? Ask them which of these factors are things they can control. Once the controllable factors are identified, encourage them to manipulate these factors to help generate an ideal arousal level for performance. If they identify factors outside of their control, remind them that these are things outside of their control, and focusing on those will only “drain their batteries.” Instead, ask if there are any tools they can use to compensate for these interfering factors.

“Ain’t no use worrying about things beyond your control, because if they’re beyond your control, ain’t no use worrying....Ain’t no use worrying about things within your control, because if they are within your control, ain’t no use worrying.”—Mickey Rivers

IDENTIFYING EFFECTIVE AROUSAL LEVELS

Before you can help your athletes get to the “right” level of arousal or mental energy for performance, they first need to determine what that right level is for them. Optimum arousal is different for every person, and often differs within that person depending on the situation. For example, think about how much arousal or energy you need to perform a Fartlek workout. Is this the same level you would need for a plyometric test? What about for cardiovascular endurance training? Clearly each of these activities will require a different level of mental energy (as well as physical energy) to perform effectively. It is important for every athlete to know what arousal levels work best for them in different situations. Too much arousal can lead to nervousness, anxiety, muscle tension, and/or overaggressiveness. Too little arousal can lead to distraction, apathy, and concentration problems.

Optimal arousal levels will differ from person to person and from situation to situation. Performers need to identify what arousal levels work best for them in a variety of circumstances.

In an effort to better understand the relationship between energy/arousal levels and performance, many sport psychology professionals turn to the Inverted-U Hypothesis for a basic explanation. The inverted-U hypothesis states that performance will improve as arousal levels increase up to some optimum point. Beyond that point, however, further increases in arousal will cause performance to suffer (Fig. 18.1)

When performers are experiencing low arousal or energy levels, they will feel “flat,” sluggish, or

![FIGURE 18.1 The inverted-U hypothesis. Performance will improve with increases in arousal levels up to some optimum point, whereupon further increases in arousal will cause a performance decrement.](image-url)
tired until the energy level rises to a more optimum point. Their attention will wander; they experience a sense of apathy regarding the performance, and their body will feel physically heavy. Then as arousal increases, performers will begin to feel more energetic, motivated, and confident. This ideal performance state will begin to deteriorate, however, if performers cannot keep that mental energy level at the appropriate point. If arousal continues to increase past this ideal state, performance will start to decline, with performers now feeling too "amped up," intense, or frantic. They will feel high levels of muscle tension, have difficulty focusing, may have difficulty breathing, and may feel hyperactive. As the strength coach, you will often be able to see behavioral examples of all of these levels in your athletes. Helping them recognize their arousal levels may help them better manage these variations, thus improving their overall performance during workouts.

It is important to recognize though that not all athletes performing the same tasks will need the same level of mental energy. Every athlete will have his or her own individual zone of optimal functioning (IZOF) or state at which his or her best performance occurs. The Inverted-U hypothesis and IZOF constructs can help you better explain this energy-performance relationship to your athletes. Furthermore, having high or low levels of arousal is not always necessarily detrimental. Some athletes report needing to feel really excited in order to perform effectively (i.e., certain extreme sport athletes), and if they are feeling low or even moderate arousal levels, they have difficulty performing well. The practical reality is that how athletes handle their arousal level is far more important than how much arousal they may have. The weight room is an ideal environment for helping your athletes learn to manage arousal levels more effectively, as you can manipulate arousal in this controlled environment to illustrate how the differences correspond to their perceptions of feeling ready to perform.

MAINTAINING APPROPRIATE AROUSAL LEVELS

The reality is that every athlete or performer will experience pressure at some point in his or her career—it is a defining characteristic of competition—but it is the mentally skilled performer who can stay composed enough to perform despite that pressure. When your athletes recognize that they have too much arousal to perform effectively, can they calm themselves down? If they notice that they are too "flat," can they increase their arousal enough to get the job done? These are skills your athletes need on the competitive fields and courts, but having these abilities will also serve them well in the weight room and during training.

When you notice an athlete who seems to be overly pumped, is having difficulty focusing, and seems to be acting in a hyperactive way, you can suggest some very basic relaxation techniques to bring him or her back to that ideal performance zone. These are also effective tools for maximizing training effectiveness. Encouraging athletes to slow down, close their eyes, and take a few deep breaths is a quick method to decrease arousal levels. Another is having them take their pulse and try to actively slow it down. Sometimes the immediate physical feedback from measuring heart rate can help them recognize what overarousal feels like. If athletes can learn to control themselves, "then they have an opportunity to control the situation, instead of letting the situation control them. The athlete must find a relaxation technique that works for them; practice it, master it; and then reap the benefits in...their performance" (6).

Slow, controlled, deep breathing is an effective tool for managing the sensation of too much arousal, and is highly effective at bringing energy levels back to an ideal state.

More than likely, however, you will be confronted with athletes on the opposite side of this spectrum: those who have too little arousal to perform effectively during their workouts. These athletes will look sluggish, will be easily distracted, will be moving slowly, and will lack enthusiasm. When you see this is your weight room, you can suggest some simple activation techniques. First, research shows that mood is often impacted by music (7). If the athlete is too "flat," suggest a more upbeat play list on his or her iPod. Even if you do not allow headphones in your weight room, you likely have some sort of stereo system—crank it up! Respiration rate also impacts arousal level, but rather than using it to calm down, in this instance encourage the athlete to use it to pump up. Increasing one's respiration rate elevates heart rate and increases arousal levels. The use of energizing cue words, self-talk, and creating images of successful attempts can also be useful here. These will be discussed in more depth later in this
chapter, but are also fairly typical sport psychology “tools” or skills often described in detail in many sport psychology textbooks.

**CONCENTRATION (FOCUS)**

“Every athlete quickly recognizes that without appropriate concentration their performances will be inconsistent, error prone, and less than optimal. Concentration therefore is a skill and must be learned” (6). **Concentration** can be defined as the ability to focus on appropriate cues in a given situation and control your responses to these cues for the execution of a particular skill (4). Concentration (or focus), therefore, is a skill athletes will need to perform effectively in competition, but it is also critical for effective performance in practice and conditioning sessions. Unfortunately, it is a skill that often gets overlooked until it is notably absent—that is, it is one of the psychological skill areas that may only become visible when an athlete’s behavior reveals a lack of appropriate sport focus (8).

**ATTENTION STYLES**

One useful framework for understanding how focus or concentration works in performance settings has been Robert Nideffer’s model of attention styles. This model suggests that an athlete’s focus continually shifts between four quadrants, varying along two intersecting continuums from broad to narrow and from internal to external (9). This then implies that there is not just one type of concentration or attention style; rather, there are several different types that can affect performance. Furthermore, like the previous discussion of arousal levels, there is no one attention style that is best for every person in every situation. Each type of athletic performance may demand one or several attention styles throughout a performance. Each athletic situation requires a variety of specific attention styles to perform adequately. Even within the same athletic team, the concentration demands on individual athletes may be quite different. It is therefore imperative for an athlete to learn to shift his or her concentration in an appropriate manner as the situation requires. In order to do this effectively, athletes must master the ability to focus in each of the four quadrants as well as be able to shift between each as necessary (9) (Fig. 18.2).

The first attention style is a **broad external focus**, where the performer will rapidly assess a situation, taking in a variety of information from the external environment. In a strength and conditioning context, this would be the necessary focus an athlete would need at the beginning of a workout where he or she would look around the room, identifying things like how many others are present, where the water containers are located, and how loud the music is. The next style is a **broad internal focus**, where the athlete will begin to analyze

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**REAL-WORLD APPLICATION**

**A Gymnast is Faced with Maintaining Concentration During Competition**

During a gymnastics competition, there are many distractions that occur. There are external variables that may affect an athlete’s concentration and may detract from her optimal performance. The gymnast’s first event of the meet is the floor exercise. While on the floor, the gymnast has many variables on which to focus. This event involves the playing of music and synchronization of movements to the music. She will have to be able to concentrate on specific cues in the music to stay on point. In addition, competitions tend to have large crowds. Thus, there may be an excess amount of noise. She will have to be able to concentrate on the task at hand and cancel out the noise from the crowd. If she is able to focus, she will most likely perform near or at optimal level.
and plan his or her reaction to the information assessed, in essence, creating a game plan, or strategy. Carrying the same example forward, this would be when the athlete contemplates the fact that there are several other athletes waiting to use the Olympic platforms, so he or she decides to rearrange his or her workout to take advantage of the available cardiovascular equipment. The next category of focus is **narrow internal**. This is where the athlete must now be able to center his or her concentration on mentally rehearsing a performance skill, or regulating an emotional state. This stage of concentration is where an athlete internally prepares to act. In our weight room example, this could be the athlete creating a mental image of himself or herself setting the speed and pitch of the treadmill and creating the necessary energy level for a good cardio session. The fourth category of concentration is **narrow external**, where the athlete will focus entirely on one or two external cues to actually perform the action necessary. This is where the athlete will pay attention to treadmill’s display, noting items like miles per hour and METs. The final requirement of attentional style needed for an athlete to perform effectively is referred to as **shifting**. While this is not a separate attentional style in and of itself, it is a critical ability for effective performance. It is absolutely necessary for athletes to have a certain amount of attentional flexibility within any given situation. In essence, they need to be adept at “bouncing” back and forth between the other four categories to assure that they are picking up all relevant cues and filtering out all irrelevant ones. For example, if our athletes on the treadmill were only focused on the display’s readout, they might miss the external cue that their coach just came in the weight room looking for them. Clearly, effective concentration requires that you be adept at shifting your focus to the appropriate cues at the appropriate times.

**Effective concentration requires a performer be adept at shifting between a broad-external, broad-internal, narrow-internal, and narrow-external focus of attention as needed to perform in any given situation.**

### DISTRACTIONS

The ability to maintain concentration while immersed in competition or practice drills is critical to effective performance. However, the human brain is not capable of maintaining effective focus for the full duration of an athletic event or workout session. Therefore, we must be able to identify the factors that generate distractions and learn how to effectively deal with them so as not to interfere with performance.

Once you can recognize potential distractions, you can then create a plan for dealing with them. Athletes often report that their distractions come simply from thinking about the wrong things at the wrong times—that they have an inappropriate attentional style. Athletes often come into the weight room still focused on the things that happened earlier in their day, either at practice, or during school, or with relationships they have outside of the sporting arena. Letting go of those thoughts so that you can focus on the appropriate cues will be critical to the attainment of a good workout. Athletes tend to lose their concentration when they choose instead to pay attention to events and experiences that occurred in the past, start thinking about those that will occur in the future, and focus on things outside of their control or on things irrelevant to the task at hand. Furthermore, experiencing excessive anxiety or being overly tired can also cause distraction, as the athlete is then focused on inappropriate cues. As the coach, you can contribute to the creation of an effective performance environment by encouraging your athletes to get enough rest prior to their workouts, create a non-threatening environment for your athletes, and encourage them to practice their concentration skills while training.

### REFOCUSING STRATEGIES

There are several tools or strategies one can use to practice concentration. The weight room is often an ideal environment for this as well because it is usually a location where a multitude of things are going on at the same time, with several people doing different things, and loads of potential distractions present. If athletes can effectively tune their ability to shift between all the needed attentional styles throughout the duration of a workout, chances are pretty high that they will be able to transition those skills out onto the playing fields and courts. The following are some suggestions for practicing concentration skills:

- “Distraction Inoculations”—Create tools that simulate the typical distractions your athletes
training, the 2-minute drill is simply telling yourself to focus on whatever action you are performing for the next 2 minutes. At the end of that 2-minute period, you are giving yourself permission to let your attention wander. When the 2 minutes start, you are committing to fully directing your focus to the task-relevant cues needed to perform. You may become aware of internal or external distractions, but as soon as you recognize them, you make a conscious effort to bring your focus back to the task at hand. You are fully committed and fully invested in this thing right here, right now, because you know you only have to focus for 2 little minutes. This is a great exercise for practicing concentration skills because it echoes the realities of many sports. Most sporting events are composed of short bursts of plays, downs, attempts, sets or heats, followed by some sort of brief “rest” period. This occurs in resistance and interval training as well, and presents a great opportunity to challenge athletes to focus for “just this next 10-rep set” or “just this next interval” as this will get them adept at shifting in and out of intense focus.

The skills of concentration are probably the most relevant of all the psychological skills for actual performance, but they can only be mastered if the athlete has learned to control his or her arousal levels first. Concentration, anxiety, arousal, and self-confidence are all intricately interwoven, with each of these factors greatly dependent upon effective concentration skills.

CONFIDENCE AND SELF-TALK

All other things being equal, a confident athlete will perform better than one without confidence (8). Confidence is the belief that one’s abilities are greater than or equal to the demands placed upon them. It is the belief that you can successfully perform a desired behavior. Confidence is most often situation-specific, though some athletes seem to exhibit confidence across a variety of different domains. More often, however, people are confident in some elements of their lives and less confident in others, or in one skill but not others. Confidence is a critical component for effective sport participation. Confident athletes will

• Set challenging goals for themselves.
• Recover from setbacks, losses, or disappointments fairly quickly.
• Persist when faced with adversity.
• Focus on success and the relevant cues necessary to attain it.
• Stay cool under pressure situations.
• Trust themselves, their perceptions, and their decisions.
• Push themselves past their perceived limits.

An observant strength and conditioning coach will generally be able to spot an athlete lacking in confidence. They will give up easily when situations get challenging, they are generally unwilling to take risks, they will struggle maintaining focus, they will appear tentative, and they protect themselves, both physically and mentally. The good news though is that confidence is a “teachable” skill. Like many of the other sport psychology skills described in this chapter, confidence can be developed through practice, thereby improving overall performance.

All other things being equal, confident athletes will generally outperform one with low confidence because they challenge themselves more, trust in their abilities, and stay focused on the task-relevant cues needed to perform well.

BUILDING, ENHANCING, AND MAINTAINING CONFIDENCE

As a coach, you are in a position to assist athletes in developing, enhancing, and maintaining their confidence levels, both as they relate to their sports as well as in more general aspects of their lives. Although research shows that a large part of a person’s confidence is generated from success in past performances, the reality is that several other experiences and sources can contribute to this characteristic as well. Training hard and effectively can contribute to effective performance, which can enhance confidence levels. Breaking down complex skills or tasks into manageable parts and succeeding at these steps can also enhance confidence levels. Recognizing and taking control over the things you can control and letting go of those that you cannot can further enhance confidence. It is important to recognize that it is not just the “big” things that contribute to building confidence—each “little” accomplishment does too. When viewed from this perspective, every successful day in the weight room or hard workout completed can contribute to the development of confidence.

As their strength coach, the ways in which you interact with your athletes can contribute to or deteriorate their confidence in themselves. Be aware of how you communicate with your athletes, both verbally and nonverbally, during your interactions with them. You spend a great deal of time communicating expectations, teaching new skills and behaviors, providing feedback and correcting errors, and encouraging and rewarding achievement. In each of these areas, you have an opportunity to develop and reinforce confidence by acknowledging success (even the small ones) and focusing on the constructive element of criticism, rather than just the critical element. Try to “catch” your athletes being successful, rather than just catching their errors.

TYPES OF SELF-TALK

The internal language athletes use with themselves has the ability to impact everything that has been described thus far in this chapter—the setting of challenging but realistic goals, the initiation and sustaining of motivation, the trust in self to manage arousal levels, and the ability to direct and redirect focus. This internal language—self-talk—is essentially the process of thinking and cognition. It is the running dialogue you have going on in your head all the time. Self-talk is closely related to confidence in that a person’s self-talk is generally representative of what they believe.

There are basically three types of self-talk—instructional, negative, and positive. Instructional self-talk has already been alluded to earlier in this chapter in the discussion of using cue words to direct focus. Instructional self-talk helps the performer focus on technical, tactical, or task-related elements of performance with the goal of improving execution (4). Encouraging your athletes to use instructional self-talk can be beneficial in the development and reinforcement of confidence because each instance can be viewed as a mini attempt at being successful. When athletes give themselves that instructional cue and then are able to follow through on that, they have just experienced success. Knowing their instructional self-talk and
reinforcing it is a great way to help your athletes develop their confidence.

The next category, negative self-talk, is the most damaging to athletic performance but is difficult to completely avoid or control. It is generally critical and self-demeaning, interfering with a performer’s appropriate focus. Anytime negative emotions (distress, anxiety, fear, or frustration) occur, chances are that the vast majority of athletes will respond by talking to themselves negatively. Physical performance can therefore be destroyed by negative self-talk. Negative self-talk and negative thinking are virtually the same thing and are generally caused by fear of failure, fear of success, comparison to others, insecurity, poor confidence, and unrealistic expectations (6). Negative self-talk lessens the control an athlete has over himself or herself, as it inhibits constructive and reinforcing thought patterns, thus eroding confidence and impairing performance.

Positive self-talk, on the other hand, is the type of talk that programs our minds with ideas that enable us to manage situations more effectively. Positive self-talk consists of reinforcing statements we say to ourselves generally increasing energy, effort, and positive attitude, but that do not carry any task-specific cues (4). It is solution directed, not problem focused. Positive self-talk focuses on the process, stays in the present moment, and is designed to be uplifting. It is essential for athletes to learn to talk to themselves from a positive perspective, thus enhancing the probability of consistent and optimal performance. Like any skill though, positive self-talk must be practiced to acquire positive, solution-focused inner dialogue. Habits of positive thinking can become integrated and automated by an athlete if they consciously practice developing it.

The full complement of sport psychology skills and tool that might benefit an athlete during his or her workouts is beyond the scope of this chapter; however, several of the most relevant constructs have been presented here. The concepts of goal setting, motivation, energy and arousal management, concentration, self-talk, and confidence development are all elements of sport psychology training that every athlete can use to better not only their performance, but their experience of that performance as well. Athletes who have practiced with these mental skills are better able to perform more consistently across competitions, recover their composure more quickly after a mistake or distraction, and perform at their best when the pressure is on. As the strength and conditioning coach, you are in a prime position to assist your athletes with these critical constructs.

### Summary

It can be argued that the weight room, in and of itself, is a performance environment, with the activities contained therein, the sporting event, and the strength and conditioning coach, the team leader. As such, all of the tools of sport psychology that a sport coach can implement with his or her athletes on the field of play and in performance and practices can be replicated and reinforced in the weight room by the strength and conditioning coach.

### Maxing Out

1. A head coach indicates that he is concerned about the motivation levels of his athletes for their training sessions. The coach asks the Strength and Conditioning coach to help "pump up" the athletes to get them more motivated for workouts. What does the S & C coach need to understand about motivation? How might they be able to better understand the existing motivation levels of the athletes? What might they be able to do to impact that motivation?

2. A football player tells the Strength and Conditioning coach that his main training goal for the season is simply "to get stronger." How can the coach work with this athlete to improve the structure and phrasing of this goal statement? How might they work together through this process to develop effective short-term and long-term goals to attain this season long mission?

3. Why is it important for an athlete to understand the ideal arousal level needed for them in the weight room? If they find that they are "too low," what might they do to elevate this energy level? If they find they are "too high," how might they get more "pumped up"?

4. Strength and Conditioning training requires different types of attention and focus at different times. When might an athlete need to have a "broad-external" focus? A "broad-internal" one? When would they need a more internal focus?

5. What kinds of self-talk might be beneficial for an athlete during conditioning training? How does an athlete's self-talk relate to their confidence?
CASE EXAMPLE

A Change in Playing Status

BACKGROUND
Mike has been playing soccer for the past 5 years. He is currently a junior and playing for his college team. He had been starting each match; however, he has recently lost his starting position. Mike is not putting as much effort into each practice, being antisocial toward teammates. As well, he has been nonresponsive during practices. What could Mike be suffering from and what might be done to help him?

CONSIDERATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS
The behaviours exhibited by Mike could illustrate that he is suffering from decreased motivation. The strength and conditioning coach or sport psychology consultant could communicate with Mike to establish his main motivators and possibly reevaluate what he wants from the sport.

IMPLEMENTATIONS
A sport psychology consultant could work in unison with the strength and conditioning coaches and athletes to develop different strategies or techniques to better help athletes find motivation in their sport. Possible ways of accomplishing this would be by setting goals, as well as finding meaning within themselves and their sport. Over time, Mike will hopefully find new motivation within himself to perform at his optimal level, in turn possibly regaining his status within his team.

REFERENCES