



“Mindless” Athletes: A Need for Holistic University Sport Performance Enhancement Programs

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Popular former baseball player Yogi Berra, known for his eclectic, off-the-wall comments, stated what most coaches and athletes believe, “Ninety percent of the game is half mental” [1]. In a more straightforward manner, former Olympian Bruce Jenner detailed the importance of the psychological skills of athletes, “You have to train your mind like you train your body” [1]. Today, as compared with 20-30 years ago, coaches, athletes, and athletic directors have a much better understanding of how gaining the “mental edge” can give one athlete or team the competitive advantage over another athlete or team [2,3]. Researchers investigating the effects of psychological skills training show that positive effects were evident in at least 85% of the studies [4-6]. Yet it appears that most college athletic programs do not formally recognize nor employ sport psychologists/mental enhancement trainers (SP/MET) for their teams. Why is this so?

Randomly perusing the structure of several university athletic programs, an Athletic Director (AD) is usually at the helm, followed by one or two Assistant ADs, head and assistant coaches, a Director of Strength and Conditioning (with several full-time and graduate strength and conditioning students to disperse amongst the teams), a Director or Head of Athletic Training (with several full-time and students to assist with the various teams), Marketing and Promotion personal, Financial and Compliance officials, Media/Relations staff, Academic Counselors, etc. Putting it all together, this staff of anywhere from 30-100 employees and volunteers function to promote and support the success of the university’s athletic teams. Aside from winning, a main concern of the program is the health of the athlete; that is, minimizing or mending athletes’ injuries and enhancing their strength and conditioning. All of these activities act to maintain and enhance the physical prowess of the athlete. To accommodate teams, the Director for Strength and Conditioning and Director for Athletic Training will disperse their staff to “work” with the teams on a daily basis. Obviously it is apparent that university athletic programs have “bought” into the idea that dealing with injuries and enhancing athletes to be top physical specimens is of utmost importance. This can be seen with the nationwide searches that are carried out to replace heads of strength and conditioning and athletic training positions. And they’re paid quite handsomely too, as they should be, as their job contributes vitally to the success of the program. And some schools will even go the extra mile and add a nutritionist or dietician to their staff. But if the importance

of gaining a competitive “mental” edge is widely recognized in the sporting world, then where does the development and enhancement of the psychological skills of athletes fit into the grand scheme of the structure of athletic departments? It doesn’t.

Fortunately, some universities are beginning to understand the importance of making their athletic programs a more balanced, holistic, mind-body approach. For instance the Athletic Director at Purdue University, Morgan Burke, is structuring his program to include all facets of performance development and enhancement. He is attempting to treat strength and conditioning, athletic training, nutrition, and mental skills training as co-equals [7]. This created a new position, Director of Sport Performance, in which all the aforementioned activities are overseen. The University of Notre Dame, Columbia University in Missouri, University of Dayton, and University of Washington have taken similar approaches. The advantages to this approach is that members of each specialized area are now more cohesive, which facilitates communication between sport medicine professionals, coaches, and players alike. And coaches are more apt to “buy” into the importance of enhancing their athletes’ psychological skills to go along with the physical aspects. For instance, if athletic trainers are helping injured athletes through the rehabilitation process, they may now easily call upon a SP/MET to help the athlete through the mental aspects of being injured and out of the lineup. Or if an athlete is dealing with a distorted self-image and an eating disorder, the SP/MET can tackle the self-image problem and then have a nutritionist or clinic psychologist deal with the eating disorder.

Along with creating a more cohesive sport performance program, athletic programs will be less apt to use strength and conditioning coaches or athletic trainers as ad-hoc SP/MET. Because strength and conditioning coaches and athletic trainers usually take a sport psychology class within their graduate program, they may believe they have the tools and know-how to effectively modify and enhance the athlete psychologically. And believe it or not, this happens more often than not. Effective... nothing could be farther from the truth. Imagine if a coach asked a SP/MET to lead his or her team in strength and conditioning exercises? Even if the SP/MET may have taken classes or gained knowledge in developing muscle mass, speed, agility, injury prevention, etc., the coach would be very hesitant in allowing an “unqualified” individual to be “messing” with his or her team. The same goes for the SP/MET who has learned how to tape up an ankle but is directed to let the athletic trainers do their thing. The main question here is why do coaches have a degree of confidence in allowing strength and conditioning coaches and athletic trainers to apply their trade with the athletes yet are very hesitant and somewhat stand-offish when calling upon the services of a SP/MET?

The following are reasons coaches (and athletic directors) may not give credence to services rendered by SP/MET as opposed to other athletic support services (e.g., athletic training, strength and conditioning, nutrition professionals):

1. Observable results – Larger muscles, more explosive strength, and a less-winded athlete show the coach that progress is being made by the strength and conditioning coach. Less body fat, more energy, and a healthier glow on an athlete’s face tells

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the coach that the nutritionist/dietician is doing his or her part. And an athlete whose injured wrist is bounded with tape or injured foot is secured in a protective boot is evidence that athletic trainers are carrying out their role of treating a present injury and preventing the occurrence of a future one. But when SP/METs work with athletes on such skills as self-confidence, anxiety reduction, or increased focused attention, the observable results are less evident. Interpretations and conclusions must be drawn from the coach about any subtle changes to the athlete's psyche.

2. Control – To a certain extent, coaches are control freaks. Coaches must be aware and dictate what goes on with almost every aspect of their athletes and team services. When considering the amount of pressure university coaches are under to produce wins, one can only imagine why they would want to have considerable control over what goes on with their team. Most coaches are more than willing to allow athletic trainers full control over servicing their athletes, mainly because the coaches' expertise is not in this area. Coaches can, and back in the day use to, deliver adequate service in the strength and conditioning area, but due to restrictions in NCAA coach-athlete contact time and because weight lifting and cardiorespiratory exercises become quite routine, monotonous, and more specialized, control is usually handed over to strength and conditioning specialists. But when it comes to the psychological functions of athletes, coaches usually believe that this is one area that is part of their coaching domain. Most coaches are well schooled in instructing the athlete in physical skills, tactics, strategies, and anticipatory know-how. And some coaches have taken a sport psychology class, have read several self-help sport psychology books, and through their experiences have built up their own psychological approach to the game [8]. Thus coaches may feel "threatened" when employing a SP/MET because of clashes in coaching philosophies (i.e., authoritarian versus democratic coaching style), disagreement in interpreting an athlete's psyche, incongruence's in the way certain mental skills are taught, reprogramming whatever mental skills might have been taught by coaches, and a sharing of credit when a team or individual markedly improves.
3. Trust issues -- Some coaches with a less than desired open-door policy may feel jilted when athletes find it easier and are able to share personal and performance issues with a SP/MET. Furthermore, coaches may believe that some athletes may communicate their negative sentiments about the coach, team, or teammates to the SP/MET and therefore create divisions within the program. Going further, coaches who share sensitive information about their players to a SP/MET may feel like they need to be on guard with what they say because they have concerns that the SP/MET may breach confidentiality.
4. Lack of knowledge about what a SP/MET does – Oftentimes a coach may call upon the services of a SP/MET when things are going bad; that is, the team is engaged in a losing streak or lacking cohesion, or an athlete is not performing as they should. In this regard, coaches are looking for alternative solutions that they can't figure out themselves or they are looking to show the AD that they are taking extraordinary steps to make their team and players successful. When SP/

METs are put in this predicament their role is to "put out the fire" and "sprinkle their magic around". Unfortunately, altering bad habits, changing behavior, and enhancing mental skills are not overnight processes. Much like increasing physical strength, aerobic capacity, speed, agility, endurance, sport skills, tactics and strategies, an effective change or enhancement in mental behavior/performance takes time. Mental skills must be practiced daily much like physical skills.

5. Lack of strong theoretical foundations and unreliable intervention strategies – Even though the discipline of sport psychology has been studied for many decades, more in-depth research and stronger theories will advance its credibility. Unfortunately, it is very hard to validate the efficacy of various intervention techniques with sport performance as numerous variables can account for success and failures. One intervention may seem to contribute to the success for one athlete or team while the same intervention may produce opposite effects for another athlete or team. Fortunately a summary of studies may shed positive light on the effectiveness of psychological skills training [4-6].

So what is the future of SP/MET within university athletic programs? As mentioned earlier, ADs and coaches must understand the role of SP/METs; that is, SP/MET can contribute to the overall mind-body development of an athletic program. SP/METs complement coaches, not "threaten" them. Most athletic service providers (athletic trainers, strength and conditioning coaches, etc.) are scrutinized by the head coach and his or her players. If they don't like the services of a particular individual then he or she will be replaced. The same can be said for a SP/MET. Therefore it is in the best interest of SP/METs to not create "turf" wars with the coaching staff. By having SP/METs appointed by ADs to be part of the athletic program, SP/METs will feel as if they are part of the athletic service provider team. This will allow SP/METs to be more active with teams on a daily basis. Becoming more exposed to a team's coaches and players will build trust and respect, open communication channels, etc. And most importantly, it will allow SP/METs to better understand an athlete's psychological profile rather than using a "canned" approach of offering the same intervention to every athlete. Far too often the only times coaches ask for the services of SP/METs are at the start of a season, and that is to make a couple of presentations to their team. Athletes are different in their psychological make-up and how they deal with the various aspects of competition. SP/METs need to sit down with athletes on an individual basis to try to get to know their psychological core and typical role-related behaviors. Dealing with athletes on a daily basis is what athletes need to enhance their psychological skills. A culture needs to be developed by the AD in which coaches and players are willing to accept the principle that developing mental enhancement skills or behavioral change takes time and practice, just like accepting the fact that regular physical training will lead to a stronger, healthier, and more conditioned body. Players "summoned" to meet with the SP/MET should not feel as if something is "wrong" with them. They should understand that talking with a SP/MET is like a coach spending time with an athlete trying to work on improving an aspect with regard to his or her physical skill, except now it is trying to enhance an aspect of his or her mental skill.

An alternative model to SP/METs working directly with athletes is one in which SP/METs are primary consultants to the coaches, educating them on various psychological concepts and techniques [9]. In this manner, the coach becomes the mediator between the SP/

MET and athlete. This approach at least solves the trust and respect aspect that athletes may not give to an "outsider". Unfortunately this model may not be best for teams in which the communication is somewhat constrained between the coaches and their players. Furthermore, SP/METs have much more experience and therefore are ideal for the delivery of performance enhancement techniques such as diaphragmatic breathing, imagery, and progressive muscular relaxation.

Whether it is best for SP/METs to communicate directly with athletes or through coaches is a topic for further discussion. The main point of this editorial is that even though the understanding that psychological principles and techniques are important for the overall success of athletes and teams, there is still great gains that need to be made by ADs, coaches, and athletes in order for SP/METs to gain the same recognition and respect as such support staff as athletic trainers and strength and conditioning coaches. The day of coaches and athletes calling SP/METs "mind-benders", "shrinks" and "people who fix mental problems" need to be replaced with creating an integral role for SP/METs within the team fold... a team fold consisting of experienced professionals who modify and enhance the physical and psychological skills of athletes and teams toward developing an overall mind-body experience leading to achievement.

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