Coaching Strategies for Helping Adolescent Athletes Cope with Stress

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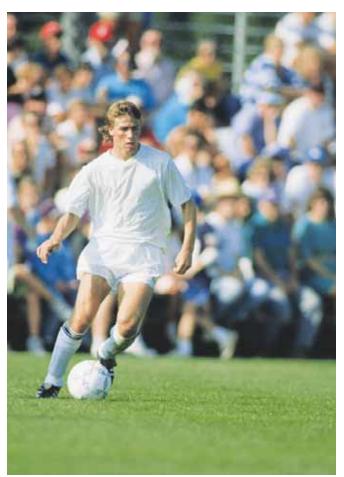
Reduce the stress about reducing stress in your athletes.

Participation in sport has numerous benefits for young athletes, including improved skill development, fitness, and self-esteem. Nevertheless, sport is also known to be a stressful environment for some of its participants (Voight, 2002; Weinberg & Gould, 2007). What is it about the sport environment that young athletes find stressful? This question was asked in a recent study that the authors conducted with a competitive adolescent soccer team and its two coaches over an eight-month period. To ensure a comprehensive picture of the types of stress that young athletes may encounter, data were collected in all parts of a season (i.e., indoor and outdoor seasons, spring training, playoffs, and tournaments). The purpose of this article is to describe common stressors related to sport competition and strategies that coaches can use to help their young athletes cope with stress. These strategies are based on suggestions provided by the coaches and athletes involved in the study and are supported by the coaching and sport psychology literature. See table 1 for a list of the stressors and suggested coaching strategies that will be reviewed in this article.

Meeting Expectations of Self

Some athletes pressure themselves a great deal to perform well and achieve athletic success (Orlick, 2000). This self-imposed performance pressure may lead to significant stress. Coaches should create a supportive team atmosphere and adopt and espouse a positive attitude in order to help athletes deal with the stress resulting from self-imposed performance expectations. When coaches model a positive attitude and confidence, athletes may adopt this perspective themselves (Thompson, 2003), and this can act as a coping resource. Further, the coach should refrain from harshly criticizing individual players, the referee, or the opposing team and should also pay attention to negative nonverbal language (e.g., throwing down a clipboard in frustration or negatively shaking one's head). Thus, the coach should use positive language when addressing the team. When appropriate, coaches should discuss team errors rather than individual errors. This may alleviate the pressure that some athletes feel when they have made performance errors.

Coaches may also be able to buffer stress by helping athletes develop goals that are within their reach and written according to the SMART principle. That means that goals must be specific, measurable, action-oriented, reasonable, and time-oriented (Brown, 2005). For example, if a softball pitcher has difficulty throwing a fastball, an effective goal may be, "I will throw 15 fastball pitches on my own after practice three times a

Performing under the eyes of parents and friends in the stands puts considerable stress on young athletes.

week." Once the goal is set, the coach should regularly ask the athlete about his or her goal. This will provide an opportunity to discuss the goal and modify it as needed and help keep the athlete accountable for working towards achieving it. Effective goals help to keep the athlete focused on reasonable expectations, which may alleviate stress.

Another reason that athletes feel stress about meeting their own performance expectations is because they identify themselves as athletes. Thus, when they win, they feel good about themselves, but when they lose, their self-esteem suffers. Orlick (2000) reminds performers not to identify with a loss, but to consider it something that is being experienced. Even when a game is lost, it is important to note that the athletes probably did some things well. To emphasize these good components, the coach could call a post-game team meeting and have each athlete share at least one positive "highlight" (Orlick, 1998). The team could discuss well-executed offensive strategies, the tenacity shown during a challenging defensive play, or the athletes' use of encouraging verbal comments. To help athletes avoid focusing solely on their athletic identity, it is helpful to emphasize the whole person. For example, before or after a practice session, coaches can inquire about the athletes' lives outside of sport. These simple strategies reinforce that athletes are not measured only by their athletic successes and failures.

Meeting the Expectations of Coaches and Parents

Athletes have a number of stimuli to attend to while competing, but the amount of information that an individual can process at one time is limited (Cox, 2002). When athletes worry about performance evaluations from coaches and parents, they are less likely to successfully attend to competitive stimuli and their performance may suffer. In turn, this situation can create stress for the athlete.

Coaches should praise athletes when they perform well, including when they are unsuccessful in their performance, but have made their best effort (Smoll & Smith, 2002). Coaches should also respond to athletes' mistakes with encouragement and technical instruction (Smoll & Smith). Furthermore, these behaviors may help to reduce stress and increase self-esteem because they remind athletes that, while the coach expects them to work effectively and efficiently, they are not expected to be perfect.

Many athletes are stressed about meeting the expectations of their coaches and parents because these significant people have not clearly communicated their ideas to them. Athletes are often unsure about what the coach really wants with respect to competition performance and training behaviors. Formal team meetings before the beginning of the season, and on other occasions as needed, provide a venue for the coach to outline expectations for the team and create an effective team culture (Vealey, 2005). Thus, meetings lessen the incongruence between the coach's actual expectations and the athletes' perceived coach expectations. Parents should be invited to participate in these meetings as well, because this may open up the dialogue with respect to the expectations that parents have for their children. A further benefit of including parents in the team meeting is that the parents will get the same information about the coach's expectations and can help the athlete to live up to them.

With respect to meeting the expectations of parents, the coaches could implement a parent contract. Though this strategy has traditionally been used to deal with parental disagreements (Gilbert, Gilbert, & Trudel, 2001b), it could also be used to help alleviate athletes' stress about parental pressure. The contract should provide clear and specific guidelines for parent behavior, stating that behaviors such as yelling discouraging comments to the athletes while they are playing, or keeping individual performance statistics, are unacceptable. This contract may make some parents think twice about the negative effect that their behavior can have on their children as athletes and as people.
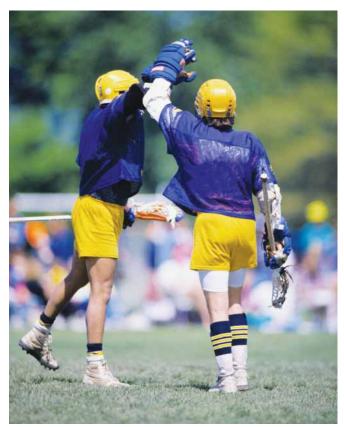
Important Competition Worries

Sport contests that have strong importance for the athlete—such as games that determine rankings, play-offs, or sudden-death situations— can be a key source of stress. This is true for athletes at all levels of competition (DiCicco & Hacker, 2002).

Coaches should downplay the team's win-loss record by teaching that success occurs in the process of striving for victory and does not depend only on the outcome of the

Table 1. Strategies to Address Common Athlete Stressors

Stressor	Coaching Strategies

Meeting Expectations of Self	• Create a supportive team atmosphere.
	  o Model a positive attitude.
	  o Encourage positive communication.
	  o Discuss team errors.
	• Emphasize goal setting.
	• Challenge athletic identity.
	  o Discuss post-game highlights.
	  o Emphasize the whole person.

Meeting Expectations of Coaches and Parents	• Praise performance and effort. • Respond to errors with technical instruction. • Conduct informative team meetings. • Implement a parent contract.

Important Competition Worries	• Emphasize the process.
	  o Downplay win-loss record.
	  o Set performance objectives.
	  o Discuss developmental (team) statistics.
	• Help establish pre-game routines.
	• Encourage blocking or changing channels.
	• Use refocus cue words.

Starting and Playing Time	• Clarify athlete roles.
	  o Keep athletes informed.
	  o Rotate starters.
	• Distribute playing time equitably.
	• Emphasize the mental game.

Frustration with Teammates	• Use a commitment checklist. • Rotate positions. • Provide opportunities for team building.
Coach Criticism and Feedback	• Focus on skills, not on the athlete. • Critique calmly. • Encourage positive self-talk.

Injury and Its Consequences	• Use a team injury buddy.
	• Assign other responsibilities.
	  o Record developmental or team statistics.
	  o Design and run practice drills.
	• Encourage healing visualization.

Good relationships among teammates may lessen the frustration felt when an individual performs poorly.

contest (Smoll & Smith, 2002). They can emphasize process by helping athletes set performance objectives for each game, such as to correctly execute an offensive strategy. Coaches could also discuss developmental or team statistics, such as number of shots on the opposing team's goal, rather than individual statistics or statistics that depend solely on the outcome of the game (Gilbert, Gilbert, & Trudel, 2001a). These suggestions may take the focus away from the final game score, thereby alleviating the stress related to the competitive event.

A pre-competition plan, which can include a good warm-up, is a way to help athletes prepare for successful performances (Orlick, 2000). Furthermore, plans that systematically outline how an athlete should act and think before performing can help them feel confident and more in control (Vealey, 2005). Thus, coaches could assist in establishing routines to help athletes get physically and mentally ready before competition. For example, in addition to the team warm-up, a soccer athlete may need to practice footwork individually and may also want to spend some time visualizing the use of this footwork in the game. Consistent routines help remove uncertainty about expectations, thereby alleviating stress.

During important games (and in regular contests also), some parents may degrade the other team's performance with loud, inappropriate comments in order to give their team a competitive edge (Thompson, 2003). This negative verbiage is commonly known as "trash talk" and can be a key source of stress for young athletes. Other distractions in

an important contest may include the referee's decision on a close call or feelings of nervousness. In order to be successful, athletes need to block out these distractions and focus on performance. To help athletes do this, Orlick (1998) developed an exercise called "changing channels." In this exercise, individuals mentally change their channel, or focus, and become absorbed in their new focus. They may, for example, think about a time when they played while fully focused on the performance and did not even hear discouraging comments from others. If the athletes immerse themselves in these positive images, they will be more likely to effectively cope with stress and perform successfully.

When athletes become distracted during important competitions, refocus cue words can be used to quickly restore their attention to their performance and lessen the likelihood of unfocused play. Simple words or phrases such as "Come on," "Focus," or "Let's go" might jolt the athlete's attention back to where it should be (Orlick, 1998). Coaches could help athletes develop appropriate refocus cue words and give them opportunities to practice during training sessions. Further, coaches could assist athletes in refocusing during games. An encouraging "Play on" from the coach could remind athletes to use their refocus cue words when distracted. If appropriate, coaches could even allow athletes to write their cue words on their equipment so the athletes can refer to these visual aids during a game (Thompson, 2003). For example, volleyball athletes struggling with accurate passing during an important game could benefit from seeing the refocus cue words "get low" written on the top of their shoes.

Starting and Playing Time

Athletes aspire to be a part of the select group that is on the floor or court at the beginning of the game. Because of the structure of sport, only a limited number of athletes will be chosen to start. Furthermore, athletes join the team to play and compete, so playing time is an important issue (DiCicco & Hacker, 2002). The prospect of not starting in competition, and in some cases not playing, can be stressful for athletes.

One strategy that coaches can use to help athletes in this regard is to keep them informed about their roles. At the end of a training session, the coach could announce the next game's starting line-up. Providing this information early and at the end of a practice gives athletes time to reflect on the coach's choices away from the athletic environment and to start to prepare for their initial position (i.e., on the field/court or sidelines). Cohesion is enhanced when athletes clearly understand their role on a team (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). Coaches should communicate that the plan is flexible and may change based on the athletes' health status, attendance, or playing conditions. They could also rotate the starting line-up so that all athletes have an opportunity to experience the initial part of the game. Nonstarting athletes may not feel as stressed about missing a starting spot if they know that the coach will give them an opportunity in another game.

Giving every athlete a chance to play will also alleviate

stress about playing time. A key factor in sport participation for athletes of all ages is enjoyment (LeBlanc & Dickson, 1997; Scanlan, Russell, Beals, & Scanlan, 2003). Enjoyment is not only about winning, but about actually playing the game and contributing to the team's successes or failures. In fact, most young athletes "would rather play for a losing team than be members of a winning team and sit on the sidelines" (LeBlanc & Dickson, p. 9). This does not mean that each athlete needs to receive the same amount of playing time, but a fair amount, regardless of skill level. Although "fair" may be defined differently by each coach and may change based on the time left in the game, the score, and the game's importance, it does not involve putting a less skilled athlete into the game for a few minutes after the game's outcome has all but been determined. This approach minimizes the less skilled athlete's potential contributions and can actually contribute to his or her stress. Therefore, coaches should try to get every athlete involved in every game in some capacity and distribute the playing time as equitably as the current context allows.

Athletes should be encouraged to use their time on the sidelines as an opportunity to learn and improve. Therefore, coaches should encourage athletes to mentally focus on the game instead of just being a cheerleader when sitting on the bench or sidelines. The coach could reinforce this mindset by reminding the second-string quarterback to watch the defensive line set-up and visualize the most effective play to call. If the athlete is involved in the game, his disappointment about not playing will be minimized. Furthermore, if the athlete does get the call to go in, he is more likely to be prepared because "positive imagery is a way of programming the mind…to perform closer to one's potential" (Orlick, 2000, p. 46).

Frustration with Teammates

Team sport athletes must commit to the team in terms of their attendance, intensity level, and effort. Athletes may experience stress when there is a perceived lack of teammate commitment in these areas, because commitment is a key requirement for athletic success (Orlick, 2000). Based on the data collected with the youth soccer athletes, frustration with teammates as a stressor is caused mainly by the teammates' lack of commitment, poor play, and lack of focus.

If athletes are having trouble committing to the team in terms of their attendance, or if they are physically present at games and training sessions but are not "mentally" there, a commitment checklist may help. Coaches and athletes should first identify the behaviors that define their commitment to the team and make a checklist of them (Vealey, 2005). For example, a checklist item could relate to each athlete setting a daily training goal before the start of practice. The checklist may alleviate stress because it formalizes team commitment and helps keep athletes accountable. However, as Vealey noted, coaches should not use the commitment checklist to berate athletes.

Sometimes athletes may feel that their teammates are not performing well because they are unclear as to the nature and responsibilities of their teammates' positions. For example, a softball shortstop may be slowly creeping over to second base and continually glancing at the second base runner who is leading off the base. Seeing this from the outfield, the right fielder may think that the shortstop is out of position and not focused even though the shortstop is attending to her defensive responsibilities. When appropriate, coaches can rotate positions and let athletes play positions outside of their regular scope (Janssen, 1999). This may bring greater insights into the tasks associated with each position and alleviate the frustration with teammates, because athletes will gain a better understanding of their teammates' performance responsibilities (Weinberg & Gould, 2007).

It is natural for a team to have peaks and valleys in the quest for athletic success. When the team is a cohesive unit working towards common goals, there may be a better understanding of this natural "up and down" flow. Another benefit of a cohesive team is that there may be less individual frustration when a team member is not playing well or is unfocused. Team-building activities are a way to create cohesion among athletes. Team dinners, scavenger hunts, or getting away from the sporting environment to do something fun as a team (e.g., go to a movie or play a pick-up game of another sport) can bring the team closer together (Janssen, 1999).

Coach Criticism and Feedback

Athletes who have adopted an attitude of "no mistakes, only learning opportunities" (Johnson & Gilbert, 2004) are able to see errors as a part of the natural learning process. They will more readily accept constructive criticism as a chance to improve (Orlick, 2000). In fact, constructive criticism is essential for helping to improve one's performance (Thompson, 2003). Unfortunately, not all athletes share this perspective. For some, receiving constructive criticism or feedback can be very stressful.

To help athletes receive constructive feedback with the right attitude, coaches must choose the appropriate emphasis. For example, it is fundamental that teachers critique students' behaviors and not the students themselves. Coaches also need to adopt this emphasis and focus their comments on the execution of skills, rather than on the athlete as a person (Martens, 2004). Therefore, if a tennis athlete is not serving well, critiquing the location or height of the pre-serve toss will be more effective than telling the athlete that he or she is "not in the game."

Additionally, the coach should deliver feedback in a calm and rational manner. If coaches yell when communicating, athletes may respond with increased stress levels, or may hear only how the message is being delivered rather than its content. Further, athletes may "shut down" and temporarily withdraw from the context (DiCicco & Hacker, 2002). Therefore, when coaches deliver skill-execution feedback in a controlled manner, athletes will learn that feedback is a natural part of the learning process and should not experi-

ence overwhelming stress when being exposed to it in the sporting context.

Even when coaches use the above strategies to provide constructive feedback, some athletes may begin to doubt their abilities and use negative self-talk. Phrases such as "That was stupid" or "How can I play so badly?" can contribute to poor performance (Weinberg & Gould, 2007) and add to an athlete's stress. Conversely, positive self-talk can help build confidence and motivate an athlete to persist, which will improve performance (Cox, 2002). Therefore, a useful exercise is to have athletes practice changing their negative thoughts to positive ones (Weinberg & Gould). If a field-goal kicker in football says, "I am going to miss this field goal by kicking wide," he can be instructed to make his statement positive: "I am going to kick the ball right through the uprights for three points."

Injury and Its Consequences

When athletes become injured, they experience feelings of isolation due to their inability to participate. This often leads to stress because they are worried about whether they will be able to continue achieving athletic success (Brown, 2005; Russell, 2000). Athletes may also experience stress when they return to competition before healing fully, and as a result are unable to perform at their optimal level.

One way that coaches can help athletes deal with the frustration that may accompany their injury is to assign to them a teammate who is willing to act as a buddy. Ideally, the buddy would have gone through a similar injury and can share his or her experience about the pain, rehabilitation process, and eventual return to competition. The buddy should provide encouragement and motivation to the injured athlete and may even accompany the injured athlete to rehabilitation sessions. Social support has been identified as a key coping mechanism to help injured athletes deal with their stress (Cox, 2002). It is, of course, important for the buddy to have a positive outlook and to be generally optimistic about injury rehabilitation.

Coaches can also assign other responsibilities to the injured athlete that will make him or her feel useful and valuable. The ice hockey athlete on crutches, for example, could record developmental statistics related to the number of face-offs in the offensive zone won and the number of shots on net. Brown (2005) noted that athletes in rehabilitation should resume contact with the team as soon as is feasible, even if they are not ready to return to play. Furthermore, the injured athlete could be given the task of designing drills focused on specific aspects of the game. If approved by the coach, the injured athlete would then be charged with running these drills during practice sessions. These types of responsibilities provide opportunities for the injured athlete to stay engaged with the team.

Coaches may help athletes relieve their injury stress by encouraging them to use visualization or mental imagery during rehabilitation (Russell, 2000). For example, athletes may imagine that when they do a rehabilitation strength-training

exercise, a group of miniature construction workers get inside their muscle fibers and work to rebuild the infrastructure. Imaging the healing and recovery process empowers the "body and mind to carry out the healing more fully and more quickly" (Orlick, 1998, p. 84) and may help the athlete cope more effectively because he or she is engaged both mentally and physically in the rehabilitation process.

Conclusion

Because stress can impair athletes' enjoyment of sports and the quality of their performance, it is important to help them cope with it. Many of the suggested strategies for doing so may be easily implemented by a coach, particularly by coaches who review the references listed at the end of this article. Other strategies, however, may require greater expertise and familiarity with sport psychology. In these cases, the coach may prefer to bring in an outside person to help. For a fee, a sport psychology consultant may be obtained by contacting the Association for Applied Sport Psychology on their web site (www.aaasponline.org). Alternatively, coaches may want to contact the kinesiology department (or similar type of department) at their local college or university and inquire as to whether they offer a sport psychology program. Faculty members with expertise in sport psychology may be able to assist coaches for a small fee. Another option may be for university faculty to supervise a sport psychology graduate student who may consult with the team as part of an internship experience at no expense to the coach.

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expressed procedures for finishing class. This may include sitting on the carpet ("the comfy zone") while putting on shoes, or lining up at the door.

- Using centering or calming activities during closure is very important after a particularly lively class. Taking a moment to reflect on the lesson and to ask questions allows students to go to their next class in a calm state. Especially at the elementary level, the classroom teacher will appreciate these efforts.

Dealing with Unexpected Events

The inexperienced teacher very quickly learns that there is no such thing as a "typical" day. Examples of unexpected events include school-wide emergencies or drills, a student's illness or injury, visitors, or having the instructional space usurped unexpectedly for other uses. Dealing effectively with these unexpected moments requires certain strategies.

- During an unexpected event, the teacher needs to turn off the music, give the prearranged signal to stop immediately, gather students in close, kneel down to them for eye contact (with elementary students), speak softly, and explain the situation calmly and without scolding.

- The experienced teacher has an emergency back-up activity in the plan book.

- If an unexpected dignitary arrives, the teacher may stop class using the aforementioned strategies, introduce the class to the dignitary, and explain the class content. The dignitary is then invited to watch the students complete their latest task (while referring to a copy of the lesson plan if possible).

Summary

More often than not, management challenges in the dance class are a result of the teacher's behavior, not the students'. Ineffective or less-than-thorough planning, unclear expectations, confusing rules, and inconsistencies lead to management challenges. These arise when the content is unclear or inappropriate for the students' age (or stage of development), learning style, or type of intelligence (Gardner, 1983). Successful management begins well in advance of the school year, and it is an aspect of every phase of class, from planning through closure. Both experienced and inexperienced teachers will benefit from reflecting on planning, greetings, introductions, instruction, transitions, performance times, closure, and preparation for unexpected events. The dance environment is energetic and exciting. It is hoped that these strategies will help the teacher successfully manage students in the dynamic content area of dance.

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