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Importance of imagery visualisation

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, imagery visualization has become substantially popular in both academic discipline and applied practice, but few within the realm of competitive athletics would argue with the importance of being mentally prepared prior athletic competition and the need that a particular type of mindset is needed before the actual competition or test. However, recent research has shown that many athletes and sporting administrators as well as coaches are still reluctant to seek the services of a qualified and professional sports psychologist even if they believe it could help them. So one of the primary reasons for this hesitation is the lack of proper knowledge and understanding about the mechanisms of how these mental skills can help them improve and boost their performance. Unlike the harder sciences of sports physiology and biochemistry where the athletes can see the change as tangible results in physical form, like in weightlifting, the more, repetition, deadlifts or crunches, you do the faster and stronger muscles we grow, the unfamiliar and often esoteric nature of sports psychology appears to be impending a large number of excess athletes from taking these important services. Therefore this article proposes to provide the reader with a simple framework about how knowledge and practice of these skills can help them boost their competitive performance. This framework is intended to bridge that understanding gap that is currently being there in the athletes and coaches. While it could also help sports psychologists to sell their valuable services to individual athletes and teams.

Keywords: imagery visualization, sports psychology, competition, mental skills

Introduction

For a number of years. Imagery has been identified as an effective tool to enhance athletic performance and sporting success, so it has become one of the most popular psychological strategies which are actually employed by a sports psychologist and coaches. Although there is a lot of evidence which highlights images' effectiveness, the mechanism behind its success or why it is so effective until recently has remained conclusively unanswered. Additionally traditional imagery theories have sought to provide some vague kind of explanations thus they have been criticized so far. However due to advancements in brain imaging techniques, the most a recent theory emerging from neuroscience research is the theory of Functional Equivalence. This theory proposes that when a person images, they activate similar areas of the brain which also become active if the individual actually engages in the task. For example, if an athlete images themselves kicking a football, the areas of the brain which become active when they actually kick a football will activate during imagery of the task. The neuronal connectivity which will further help during execution of the movement, and consequently will improve the motor output and the sporting success, these activation of new neural areas during imagery can also help in other physiological responses with are reflective of the actual situation such as the increase in the heart rate, ventilation frequency, muscle activity, Etc,

Types of imagery

Imagery is often referred to, particularly in some A level curriculums, as either visualisation or mental rehearsal. However a preferred term to describe the process is imagery. Firstly this is because as well as the seeing element, an image can incorporate additional senses such as being able to hear, smell, or feel characteristics within the image. Secondly, imagery is not only used to mentally rehearse skills and strategies, it can serve a number of other benefits which include motivational purposes. For example, an athlete who becomes very anxious prior to competing may image themselves experiencing the symptoms associated with anxiety such as increases in heart rate, sweaty palms etc, but also image themselves performing well despite

experiencing these responses. As a result the athlete can teach themselves that these symptoms are necessary to experience sporting success. Alternatively, an athlete who lacks motivation to attend training one evening may image themselves winning a particular tournament to motivate them to want to work hard and make this image a reality. The majority of reasons for athletes imaging can be classified into five main categories which have been identified in sport psychology research. These are:

1. **Cognitive Specific:** These purposes are to develop skills and techniques to improve performance.
2. **Cognitive General:** These reasons include strategy planning, development, and execution.
3. **Motivational Specific:** The purpose is to help athletes understand what it takes to achieve their goals.
4. **Motivational General Arousal:** This is using imagery to regulate emotions and arousal levels such as psyching up or relaxing.
5. **Motivational General Mastery:** when the athlete uses imagery for things such as staying focused to become mentally tough and confident. Although imagery tends to be used by athletes. For these broader five reasons, images can also be used to serve more than one purpose. Like, for example, in a basketball match, a player can imagine themselves directly performing free throws to help himself level up his specific skill set. This image is also used as a method to improve the efficiency at being able to perform the exercise. Seeing themselves successfully performed, it could serve as a form of performance accomplishment or vicarious experiences-two of Barunda's self-proposed sources of efficacy.

Effective imagery and the PETTLEP model

The PETTLEP model was developed by Holmes and Collins to be used as a 7-point checklist helping athletes create more effective imagery. It proposed that after incorporating each PETTLEP element into an imagery experience will increase the similar areas of the brain activation and consequently the imagery's success on the desired outcome. PETTLEP is an acronym which stands for the following different elements that should be addressed and correctly incorporated when using imagery to enhance athletic performance:

- Physical
- Environment
- Task
- Timing
- Learning
- Emotion
- Perspective

The elements are combination of the traditional characteristics which have been employed in imagery studies for many years (e.g., task and perspective), and those which are relatively novel and can sometimes defy more traditional approaches (e.g., physical, timing). For more details about each element, see the video lecture. Since its creation the PETTLEP model has been incorporated into numerous studies and results have been supportive, indicating the more elements incorporated, the more successful imagery tends to be on athletic performance.

As a result the PETTLEP model has become a well-

established and popular tool used to maximize the imagery's effectiveness. Success using the PETTLEP model Research has shown that using PETTLEP imagery can produce greater performance improvements for a variety of different tasks such as:

- Hockey penalty flicks
- Gymnastic routines
- Golf bunker shots
- Computer game performance
- Nursing skills

Past Research & Case Studies

In recent history, the contributions that guided imagery has made have helped people visualize improved life circumstances by connecting them to a better way of managing problematic situations. There is a large body of research that shows the effectiveness of guided imagery in treating a wide range of issues. Guided Imagery has helped people lose large amounts of detrimental weight through dieting and exercising correctly. These techniques can even be considered to be literally lifesaving, as it has been known to work so effectively that it has helped people fight off fatal diseases, such as cancer. For instance, León-Pizarro *et al.* (2007) studied 66 patients with gynecologic and breast cancer, and found that individuals who were trained in relaxation and guided imagery experienced a significant reduction in anxiety, depression, and bodily discomfort. Walker *et al.* (1999) explained that, in patients with cancer, relaxation skills combined with imagery were found to be more effective in managing pain compared with the use of just relaxation. Guided imagery has also helped treat patients' chronic pain and has proven to enhance psychological wellness within people. For example, in a study by Shapiro *et al.* (2008), 64 females with anorexia nervosa were placed in the following treatment groups: guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, self-directed relaxation, and control. A significant improvement in relaxation, feelings of fullness, and thoughts about weight and a reduction in anxiety were found in the guided imagery group (Kress *et al.*, 2013). The participants also stated they liked the guided imagery based treatment, would recommend it to others, and would practice it again. The main target for GI is to promote relaxation, which can be used to reduce several stress related problems such as high blood pressure. It can even help chronic smokers to substitute cigarette smoking with GI exercises for soothing stress relief.

Application using the PETTLEP model

If a football team wanted to use imagery to prepare for the possibility of going to penalties during the knockout phase of a tournament, application of the PETTLEP model could be as follows.

1. Physical: The players could imagine being out of breath and even make themselves out of breath prior to imaging to simulate the state they would be in during a match. The imagery could then be performed in the standing position wearing their football kit and boots in the same way they would when they prepare to take a penalty.

2. Environment: The imagery performed would be in the competition venue using photographs, videos and even an audiotape of the crowd to create an environment as close as possible to the actual situation they would encounter if actually taking a penalty.

3. Task: The task attentional demands and should be reflected in the image, therefore each footballer should focus internally and concentrate on factors such as which corner in the goal they are going to aim for. They should include the prompts they would attend to when actually taking the penalty. For example few players hardly take a look at the goalkeeper in their preparation and focus solely on the ball when waiting for the referee's whistle to begin their run up. As a result this should be mirrored in the imagery scenario.

4. Timing: There shall be real time execution of the penalty preparation including the run up and the flight of the ball.

5. Learning: Each footballer's image should match their current stage of learning. After mastering the technique the athlete can begin focusing on the image rather than how to rightly perform the task such as the changes in emotion they might experience as and when they will become more accomplished penalty taker.

6. Emotion: It is important that the footballers incorporate the relevant emotions they experience when they take a penalty so they become familiar with these and learn to associate them with success. It is also thought that the inclusion of relevant emotion will help increase the vividness of an image.

7. Perspective: If the footballers want to view the technique of taking a penalty, they may wish to perform the imagery from an external visual perspective. However they may prefer to use internal visual imagery when wanting to view the factors they will focus on when making their preparations for the penalty. As a result each footballer should consider which visual perspective is best to adopt, and possibly switch between the two. It is important that during both perspectives the athletes remember to incorporate kinaesthetic sensations associated with the task.

Conclusion

Several factors affect the performance of athletes (e.g., anxiety, nerves, poor concentration, and self-doubt). Generally, however, detrimental thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs all affect an athlete's ability to execute skills at a level that they are physiologically capable of. As such, the role of the Imaginary Visualization is to provide the athletes with the strategies and necessary tools to address these psychological factors as they arise and thus minimize their negative impact over performance.

The framework I presented should be treated and interpreted as preliminary at this point in time. It does, however, serve as a starting point for addressing the common concerns facing sport consultants in the field. By taking sport psychology out of the abstract and making it something that coaches and athletes can visualize, the current framework gives practitioners a perspective for presenting their valuable services in a more interpretable format.

It is certainly my intention that this framework for understanding be developed and expanded in the future, as I acknowledged that the current framework presents an oversimplified explanation of sport psychology as an applied practice. A more detailed explanation of specific strategies and techniques should unquestionably be a component of the consultative process, with the current model serving primarily as an introductory talking point to help consultants "get their foot in the door."

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