

Counselling Excellence – A Sport Psychologist’s Experiences with the German Women’s National Volleyball Team

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Abstract

This paper gives an overview of the psychological interventions used with the German women’s National Volleyball team – from the first contact at the initial training sessions of the newly formed team (end of 1996) to the last hours of training before the European championship in the fall of 1997. During the intensive preparation phase from July through October 1997 the team stayed together for a number of training camps. The sport psychologist was present at these camps as a full time member of the staff. Details of the psychological skills training program are presented in this article.

Introduction

After a poor performance at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta – the team did not win a medal or place in the top four which everyone in Germany had expected - Siegfried Köhler, then coach of the German women's National Volleyball team, blamed psychological problems within the team for the failure. To ensure better preparation for upcoming major competitions – the 1997 European Championships in Czech Republic, and most importantly, the Summer Olympics in Sidney 2000 – long-term cooperation with a sport psychologist was initiated for the newly formed team. Only three players from the old team became part of the new team. Six of the new players were high-class players who had been expected to replace the older players in the national team for some time. Another nine new players were less experienced but were to be trained

during the following months to become part of the elite team.

Initial Phase

The initial phase of co-operation between the sport psychologist and the team began at the first training sessions in mid-December 1996 and ended on the last day of the traditional Four Nations' Tournament in early January 1997. During the initial phase the sport psychologist was available to be with the team virtually all day long. This meant he could be with the players from the first warm-up exercises in the morning to the last team’ and coaches’ conversations in the evening.

The initial phase began with close participant observation of the team during as well as off training hours. It was apparent that there was a considerable amount of rivalry

among the three key players who had played together on the old team which turned out to be one of the issues to address in the following months. Despite this, these players, especially the team captain, took responsibility for the new players during as well as outside of training hours.

The contact between the sport psychologist and the team was intensified by individual conversations with most of the team members. Some of these conversations were structured interviews referring to special themes (e.g. handling critical game situations), others were unstructured, which were not prepared for in any way but which were guided by present-day problems of the players (e.g. missing a boy-friend). As this mix of casual and structured interviews were highly informative, they were continued until the European championship.

Aside from observation and interview, the sport psychologist gave an introductory lesson to the team comprising possible starting points for sport psychological counselling in top-performance sports.

These actions, undertaken during the initial phase, ensured an ongoing growth in the sport psychologist/team relationship during the preparation for the European Championship.

Psychological Counselling

The phase of actual preparation for the European championship covered the period from early July to the first games of the tournament in late September. The following sport psychological interventions and measures formed the core of the co-operation between the Institute for Sport Science and Sports of the University of the Federal Armed Forces Munich and the Womens' National Volleyball team during this phase:

- (1) Short-term, medium-term and long-term training of goalsetting
- (2) Enhancement of psycho-physical regeneration
- (3) Optimisation of psychic stability during competition
- (4) Regular monitoring of performance-related psychological functions and correlates
- (5) Socio-psychological interventions

The first three of these interventions were chosen as they were proven to be effective in work with previous national teams (different sports) in dealing with psychological problems related to competition and preparation for competition. These interventions can be looked upon as a general 'psychic tonic'.

Regular monitoring of psychic functions on one hand ensured control of effectiveness of interventions and helped the coach to tune his steps to the psychic state of the team, and on the other hand, demonstrated to the team that their mental condition was regarded as a critical factor, thus, functioning as an incentive for the players to work on their personal mental preparation.

Socio-psychological interventions were directed at the core problems of the team, especially the rivalry among the three original players and the lack of cohesion within the rest of the team.

Goal setting

Goal setting was chosen as the first intervention as after an introductory phase it could be continued by the members of the team even in the absence of the sport psychologist.

Goal setting: A brief introduction

The aim of goal setting was to structure the long and demanding phase until the Olympic

Games in 2000 and help the team to meet all requirements for this period of time. Another objective of goal setting was to encourage personal initiative especially during hours of training in order to influence higher intrinsic motivation. Personally formed, realistic goals are conceived as improving the individual's performance.

In goal setting, participants were to set personal goals, formulate plans to reach these goals and eventually judge the extent to which these goals have been accomplished after the allotted time. Goals and plans were written into the participant's personal goal-book; results were added when the time set for accomplishing the goal has passed. Goals were to be set for training as well as competition, for oneself and the co-operation with the team, from short-term to long-term planning, and they are to address all aspects that are important in high-performance sports: technique (e.g. attack), tactics (e.g. offensive, defensive) athletics (power, speed, endurance, psycho-motor co-ordination) and general psychic stability in competition (concentration, resistance to stress) (for an example of a goalsetting page see appendix).

Goal setting: Three fundamental steps

Basically, goal setting for the team consisted of three steps:

- (1) Goal-formulation
What is my goal?
- (2) Goal-planning
How do I reach my goal?
- (3) Goal-judgement
Have I reached my goal?

Goal-formulation

Any goal formulated should meet the following requirements:

- (1) The goal should be *tangible*: The goal should be described as detailed

and precise as possible (not: "I want to play better" but: "I want to place at least one out of two services as near behind the net as possible").

- (2) The goal should be reachable in a *fixed period of time*: All goals are formed together with clearly fixed intervals of time, in which they are to be accomplished. Without such a timetable the accomplishment of the goal is jeopardised by hesitation.
- (3) The goals should be *weighted by importance*: To avoid conflicts of goals set for the same period of time, a hierarchy of goals is needed (this can be done by rating the importance on a scale of 1 to 10).
- (4) The goals should be *realistic*: Goals should be set within a frame of the individual's abilities, capabilities and skills. (It is helpful to rate the probability that the goal can be reached on grounds of own abilities and skills on a scale of 1 to 10).
- (5) The goals should be a *challenge*: Goals that can be reached with ease are worthless. Only if obstacles have to be removed a goal is challenging.
- (6) There should be a feasible *proof of success*: This criterion is in close connection to the first one on this list: Goals should be as tangible as there is a possible proof of success ("I want 80% of my spikes in this game to be points").
- (7) Goals should be fixed in *written form*: The written form stresses the binding character of goals and facilitates a proof of success.
- (8) Goals should be worded *positively*, not negatively (e.g. not: "I do not want my spike to be a failure" but: "I want my spike to be a winner against a strong block").
- (9) Goals should be formulated in *terms of action*, not of results: Not the re-

- sult of a competition but the actions necessary should be the objective (e.g. not : "I want my service to be an ace" but: "I want to place the ball right behind the net").
- (10) Goals should be *focus on tasks* rather than ego oriented psychic states ("I want to score with my good placed jump-serve" rather than "I want to humiliate the opponent with my jump-serve").
 - (11) Goals should be oriented to a *personal norm* rather than to a common norm: Individual standards of performance are to be met independently of the actual opponent.
 - (12) Goals should be *motivated intrinsically*: Goals should be independent of external rewards but should be a value by themselves.
 - (13) There should be an amount of *dedication* to reach the goal: Only a firm will to reach the goal ensures its accomplishment.
 - (14) Goals should be *binding*: Setting a goal should be equivalent to a contract with oneself. This contract obliges the sportsman to do all his best to reach the goal.
 - (15) Goals should be set *publicly*: Public observation ensures the inner obligation to strive for the goal.
 - (16) *Visualisation* of a goal alleviates its realistic formulation in words.

Goal-planning

Pivotal to an effective action plan to reach the goal was the formation of proper subgoals, and plans of action to reach these subgoals. It was important that goals and subgoals be brought into accordance with possible goals of the coach and the team. Without such accordance harmful conflicts are imminent.

The best way to prevent conflicts of this kind (e.g. the coach does not give the athlete the chance to play in an important match) is to take alternative goals into consideration right from the start, i.e. each time a new objective is being aimed at.

Goal-judgement

After the set time for the goals have passed or at least after every mayor competition, the aims were analysed in terms of their fulfilment. This analysis is mostly supported by the sport psychologist and should be as objective and comprehensive as possible.

Differences between the intended goals and the accomplished results gave hints on a tendency to over- or under-estimate possibilities. If the aim has been reached to full extent, positive feelings should result from setting new and higher goals. If the goal has been reached in part, it should be decided whether to let the result suffice or to continue with this goal. If the goal has not been reached at all, reasons should be found and a plan for new actions should be initiated.

Goal setting: From theory to practice

The team was introduced to the principal procedures of training of goal setting as described; every player received a copy of a brief summary. Longer conversations with each individual player followed. In co-operation with team members, goal setting training tuned to the needs of the team and short- and medium-term planning commenced. The following is a brief summary of the players' preferred short- and medium term goals referring to technique, tactics, athletics, team concerns and psychic functions / mind-related matters:

Technique

Attack: Improve explosive arm stroke to gain a harder shot.

- Block:** Show more activity over the net; improve precision of sequence of steps.
- Passes:** Broaden scope of combinations; control variability in passes.
- Defence:** Perform the slide-defence sideways in perfection.

Tactics

Tactics was not a central problem in this early stage of preparation for the competition; the only point mentioned was an improvement of combinations between passers and attack.

Athletics

In three areas the emphasis lay on the following points:

- Power:** Increase takeoff power.
Speed: Increase speed of actions.
Endurance: Increase basic endurance.

Team

All players wished a better integration of self and of all players into the team in order to improve teamwork.

Psychic functions / Mind

Main themes chosen by athletes were: error handling/management, control of emotions and cognitions, coping with stress, self-presentation on the field, coping with own and others' expectancies.

All players had problems in setting tangible, concrete goals (e.g. players wanted to "increase height of jumps" rather than "increase height of jumps by 2 inches"). However, players devised careful plans for reaching set goals. Evaluation including re-formulation of goals showed that the players had preferably chosen aims that were rather easy to reach.

A conclusion to be drawn from this is that the players should be encouraged to set their

goals higher and be advised to elaborate more precise plans at the same time to ensure that aims stay realistic.

Enhancement of psycho-physical regeneration

Beginning with preparations for the European Championship, ten to fifteen minutes of Progressive Muscle Relaxation (cf. Jacobson, 1993) became part of the cool-down phase of every training unit. The text was voiced by the sport psychologist and was accompanied by music. Five reasons led the sport psychologist to employ Progressive Muscle Relaxation:

- (1) The state of psychic and physical relaxation caused by Progressive Muscle Relaxation accelerates all regenerative processes after the strains of training.
- (2) The players are taught a technique that can be applied for stress reduction and improvement of concentration during competition.
- (3) Acquaintance with Progressive Muscle Relaxation facilitates entering into Mental Training, which none of the players had encountered so far and which is planned as a further intervention for the future.
- (4) Possible reservations against sport psychology are reduced as the players learn that there are very practice-oriented procedures to offer.
- (5) Progressive Muscle Relaxation stands as an example for many other psychological interventions yet to be introduced as integrative parts of regular training. As a result sport psychology gains a status comparable to that of physiotherapy, which is highly rated by players.

After a short period of acclimatisation, players were quite fond of Progressive Muscle

Relaxation. Many players wished to do the exercises independently, so all members of the team received a copy of the audio-cassette.

Optimization of psychic stability during competition

In order to optimise competition performance which was the overall and most important goal of co-operation between sport psychologist and team, a number of psychological interventions were applied. These interventions were chosen because they had proven to be effective in work with other teams in dealing with psychological problems related to psychic stability during competition.

Interventions during training

The following interventions were special measures meant for application in training only.

- (1) *One-Touch-Training* means that every player may touch the ball only once during each task or drill. Every ball is to be looked upon as the only chance to score, so that maximum concentration is needed.
- (2) In *training with scheduled scoring* the player is restricted by a statement of the coach as to which ball contact he has to score.
- (3) *Prognostic Training*: The player has to deliver a prognosis of the score reached with a limited number of actions (e.g. 80 % successful attacks).
- (4) *Competitive Training*: Two competitors (e.g. two outside attackers) for a starting position are matched against each other either within one team or forming a one-on-one situation in a task or drill (e.g. to score against a double-block from position four. The player, who is the first to succeed in

this task (e.g. first to score ten attacks) will get the starting position.

Interventions during competition

Rituals can be a great help in critical situations. By providing a familiar element that can be relied on, they alleviate the menace that is inherent in critical situations. Though meant for application in competition in the first run, encouraging the formation with rituals can stabilise performance in training as well. The sport psychologist proposed the following rituals for the team, which were applied by the team most of the time:

Team-related rituals

During training sessions:

Saying hello and good-bye with the battle cry "One – Two – Kangaroo" as a reminder of the great goal Olympia 2000 in Australia.

Before games:

Mutual "swearing in" in the locker room.

During games:

Preparation for the next game actions according to a Four-Phases-Model developed by Schmidt and Schmöle (1997a) during the time before the next serve.

Individual rituals

To improve stress management (Schmidt, 1998) and to alleviate fear of failure in special situations of the game (service, series of failures) individual rituals (e.g. ultra short-time relaxation) were proposed or mutually elaborated in single player consultations.

Interventions outside training and competition

During off training hours, Video-Self-Commenting (VSC, cf. Hackfort & Schlattmann, 1994) was applied. VSC allows the players to watch themselves in times of training and competition and comment on their behavior, their thoughts and feelings.

By means of this method the players could be taught effective control of emotions and cognitions beneficial for competition (e.g. Positive Self-Talk, Reframing, Focussing). The first VSC-session was scheduled four weeks before the championships in order to make clear specific shortcomings. A second session of VSC was carried out three weeks later to check and inform about the success of this intervention. The main benefit of VSC turned out to be an improved self-presentation on the field ("positive arrogance").

In addition to this all players received a short introduction into Mental Training. For a number of interested players, an individually tuned program of Mental Training was elaborated in single player consultations following the general introduction into the technique. The stress of these individual programs lay on improving technical skills as well as on managing critical situations during competition.

Monitoring of performance-related psychological functions

Regular monitoring of psycho-motor functions and other psychic and psycho-social aspects related to performance was done by means of diagnostic software and a number of paper-and-pencil-questionnaires.

Psycho-motor performance

The following aspects of psycho-motor functioning were subject to regular testing:

- (1) Reaction time to optic and acoustic stimuli
- (2) Discrimination of optic and acoustic signals in terms of response time
- (3) Speed of information processing
- (4) Coordination and concentration (visual tracking and localisation of stimuli)

The diagnostic instrument used was Senso-Control®, a sport-specific adaptation of

Wiener Testsystem®. Preliminary review of the data revealed slight differences between players' positions (attack, block passes defence) but not between level of performance (first six in the team and reserve).

The performance of the volleyball players turned out to be below average compared to other high-performance volleyball players as well as to a sample of athletes from other kinds of sports. Signal discrimination and speed of information processing especially bear potential for improvement among the national team members. This is significant namely because perceptual abilities are of great importance for volleyball (compared to track and field, for instance).

Mood

Emotions in volleyball players are not only associated with success and failure in competition (cf. Schmidt & Schmole, 1997b) but also of incidents and conditions of training. Negative effects on mood, as assessed by SB-Scales (Scales of Emotional Traits and States, Hackfort & Schlattmann, 1995), are to be attributed to change of training and competition locations (e.g. long travel hours, new hotel) and extraordinary hard training sessions. Also, at the end of longer periods of training (e.g. preparation phase with additionally endurance units) worsened mood within the team was regularly found. Positive changes of mood states, on the other hand, were to be noticed on the second or third day of training and after days of recreation.

The information about players' mood states helped the sport psychologist to estimate the success of the interventions. Moreover, it proved to be a valuable help for the coach in forming small sub-groups of the team and tuning the planned training to the actual physical and psychological state of the team.

Team cohesion

Team cohesion is an important factor in warding off poor performance. Team cohesion was assessed by a volleyball specific version of a cohesion questionnaire sport (CQS) developed by Schmidt, Henkies and Fischer (in press). The instrument differentiates cohesion into two fractions referring either to social or to task-related aspects – comparable to the concepts used by Carron, Widmeyer and Brawley (1985). This questionnaire (which considers individual and group perspectives) and regularly drawn sociograms were meant to make an optimal tuning of socio-psychological interventions possible.

In the course of the preparations for the European championship team cohesion improved. An example is better verbal support by reserve players during competitions. However, at times there were struggles for power and position in the team among dominating players. On the whole, development was rated as positive, especially with regard to the younger players - most are on their way to become team leaders.

Improved cohesion is also an indicator of the positive effect of the socio-psychological interventions. The rivalry among the three top players mentioned above almost vanished (in the impression on the coach and of the players) as cohesion among the team in whole grew.

Socio-psychological interventions

The socio-psychological interventions described as follows were designed to further team-building processes and cohesion within the team. Some of these measures affect training sessions; some are of more general nature.

Interventions during training

Little games designed to further support group cohesion were carried out during

warming-up phases (e.g. playing soccer with two people tied together). Uniforms worn during training symbolised and demonstrated a close community influencing team cohesion.

Interventions outside training

Methods relying on group dynamics were applied outside the usual training situation. Examples of these methods include difficult and unusual tasks which the group had to solve by cooperating with one another (e.g. the group was blindfolded and had to cooperate finding an object). Games relying on projection were also presented to the players; the team had to discuss fictitious critical scenarios as well sport related ones. The idea was to relieve the strict routines of training and to provide a second access to team structures. The main objectives were an improvement of communication processes, a reduction of harmful hierarchies and players' awareness of unreflected attitudes and motives.

Conclusions

Over the course of this intervention an atmosphere of increased trust was developed – between the team and the sport-psychologist and even more strongly between the coach and the sport psychologist. The value of the psychological interventions and strategies designed to help the team improve became more evident to the coaching staff and team members. Even those players and members of the coaching staff who had been sceptical towards sport psychology in the beginning began to see some potential value the program. Thus, it was decided to continue with a revised program over the next twelve months. It was felt that the program should be revised based on the lessons learned from this intervention and include psychological training for the national junior teams.

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Appendix

Period of time

From: _____

To: _____

short-term goals

medium-term goals

long-term goals

Goal-formulation

Technique

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Tactics

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Athletics

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Goal-planning

Team

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Mind

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Private Life

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Goal-judgement

Technique

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Tactics

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Athletics

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Goal-formulation

Team

1. _____

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3. _____

Mind

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Private Life

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Goal-planning

Technique

1. _____

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1. _____

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1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Goal-judgement

Team

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Mind

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Private Life

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____