

Mental Skills Training for Children and Young Athletes

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Abstract

Working with children can be challenging, as it requires a certain understanding of their needs and the ability to prepare mental training sessions that will present them with useful information, and also carry a certain appeal. This purpose of this article is twofold: 1) to share some lessons learned from experiences working as mental training coach with children enrolled in summer sports camps, and 2) to introduce some newly created material that may be of use when helping young athletes develop positive mental skills and perspective.

Introduction

When helping individuals reach their full potential through mental training, being aware of the clients' needs and circumstances is of primary concern. Each athlete has his or her own needs, and individuals gathered within a group can also have particularities that may dictate the type of service offered, especially when these individuals are children.

As part of my supervised internship in mental training consulting at the University of Ottawa, I spent the summer months offering mental training sessions to children (five to fourteen years old) who were attending summer sport camps in the following sports: golf, tennis, and hockey. This sports camp had never before included a mental skills training component. The goal of these sessions was to equip these young athletes with tools that they could easily integrate into their sport, as well as their life. Within the camp setting part of the goal was

to help the children improve their skills in their chosen discipline.

I attempted to create and integrate various activities that would not only introduce mental skills to the campers, but also have enough appeal to maintain their attention and make each session enjoyable. An overview of the activities that were most successful in this particular setting, as well as the lessons I was fortunate enough to encounter along the way are presented below.

The Sessions' Activities

Comic Strips

Considering the young age of some of the participants, it was felt that straightforward presentation and discussions on the topics introduced would be difficult and perhaps ineffective. Hence, I set out to develop a few activities that would grasp their interest and encourage them to adopt strategies aimed at enhancing their performance in their sport. One of the most popular of these activities

consisted of comic strips, through which I could introduce different scenarios possibly encountered in tennis, golf, or hockey. I believe the allure of this activity was that the comic strips not only allowed them to draw, which they always seemed to enjoy, but also, that it provided an opportunity to express their creative nature, as each individual had to choose the scenarios' conclusion. These comic strips addressed many topics in mental training and required that the children fill in certain blank bubbles and empty boxes, deciding how the stories unfolded. (See page 73 & 74)

The first of these comic strip, “Let’s Play Tennis!” dealt with an unsportsmanlike opponent who not only bragged about his or her win but who also suggested that his or her opponent abandon the sport to engage in one in which they would be more successful. The children had to identify, through their drawings and chosen dialogue, how they would deal with such a situation. After the comic strip was completed with the children’s input, their sharing of how they responded to the scenario would trigger a discussion relating to the many ways to address the opponent and the particular situation. Issues such as never giving up, continuing to practice and play the sport, even if wins are rare, and to remain courteous to one’s opponents, even if they may say things that could be considered offensive, were raised through this activity. The importance of having fun instead of focusing solely on winning was also raised, and interestingly, many children at different ages indicated that the outcome mattered less than the enjoyment obtained through participation. In a few instances, children indicated that they would react violently to their opponent’s comments, by either insulting them or even fighting with them. These instances, provided the group with an opportunity to find more acceptable ways to

resolve the conflict and together, we would identify the both inappropriate behaviors and suitable replacements.

The second comic strip, “Practice Makes Perfect...” presented a story line in which the camper was having difficulty serving (in tennis) or driving (in golf). An instructor or other figure, as determined by each individual, gave encouragement to this child by pointing out this area for improvement and by also telling each of them to continue practicing in order to keep improving their skills. The purpose of this particular comic strip was to discuss challenges that may arise in a sport and encourage the children to continue practicing in order to enhance their skills. I noticed that many young children don’t particularly thrive on practices, preferring to play their sport, without necessarily targeting specific improvements. However, most of these children agreed, through their drawings, that committing oneself to practice a task will yield positive results, and thus, even if practices can be long and dull, it has many advantages.

Comic strips were a useful exercise in addressing various topics and in stimulating reflection on various ways to react to different scenarios, thus creating an ideal springboard from which to engage in discussions focused on the challenging aspects of their sport.

Motivation Meter

On some occasions, children would comment that they did not wish to participate in the camp, indicating that their parents had enrolled them without seeking their approval. Some said that they disliked the sport, whether it be tennis, golf, or hockey or indicated that would rather stay home to play with their friends or even, to watch television, rather than spending the day participating in the camp’s activities.

Stimulated by these children's perspective about going to camp, I set out to fabricate a motivation meter in an attempt to help them find the positives within the camp experience. (See page 72)

The motivation meter has two components: the first is a handout and the second is a constructed cardboard meter that can be displayed on a wall. For the first component, the campers had to indicate how eager they were to engage in various activities, on a scale of 0 to 10, 0 identifying an activity that they would avoid, and 10 representing those activities in which they would most wish to participate. A popular example to best describe these ratings is that 0 would often be reserved for school or homework, hence something they very much disliked, and 10 would be associated with playing video games and eating ice cream. Once the campers determined which activities constituted their meter's two extremes (high and low), they had to rate how eager, or motivated, they were to participate in their sport, both through practices and a game.

The larger cardboard meter on the wall served to display ratings on certain activities for all to see. Usually I would ask the children to draw a coloured circle around their rating to indicate their eagerness to participate in the particular camp. This would allow them to engage in a group activity and this was followed with a general conversation on the matter, involving all participants.

The motivation meter, as a tool, could not function on its own; it was linked to the identification of positive highlights in order to encourage children to try to carry a more positive approach to activities they deemed unpleasant. Therefore, once they had placed an activity rather low on the motivation meter, they were asked to find an enjoyable

component about this activity. Depending on the day and mood of the children, they could draw, write, or simply discuss this particular aspect of finding something positive. An example of how this functioned is that, if they said that they didn't care much for tennis, even though their parents had signed them up for this camp, they were encouraged to identify anything they found enjoyable in this camp. Perhaps it wasn't the sport itself, but rather that it created an opportunity to be with friends, or perhaps they relished a particular tennis activity, as opposed to the game as a whole, or even, that they enjoyed the daily swimming hour. Thus, instead of thinking that nothing was fun, they would find an aspect which they looked forward to and try to make the best of a deemed unpleasant situation. By challenging the campers to focus on the positive aspects of camp instead of immediately expressing their displeasure, I hoped to render these camps, or any other activity, more appealing. Moreover, hopefully they will remember to follow such a strategy whenever an imperfect situation arises, whether it be school or any other potentially disagreeable task they may encounter. Basically as Orlick says, the goal is "to help them to find the positives in the negatives, or turn the negatives into positives, or make the best of the situation" (Orlick, 1998).

Goal-Setting

I feel it can be useful for athletes to identify what they wish to gain from their participation in sport or other activities. In the case of these children and young athletes, some wanted to become professional players, and others wanted to play tennis, golf, hockey, or any other sport, simply to have fun. To help these youngsters identify what they were seeking in their sport, they were asked to draw, or write their long-term goal. They did this by dividing a sheet of paper so that it looked like a picture frame, with a large

space in the middle, surrounded by four narrower borders around the edges. To simplify the long-term goal, I suggested that they draw a picture of where they saw themselves, a year from now. For example, they could draw that they anticipated participating in a specific tournament, or simply, that they wished to win a game against their mother and/or father. Then, they would identify 4 mid-range goals using each border surrounding the main drawing to represent a quarter of the year (for example, if in July, the first box would consist of the months of July through September). They would draw, or write, what they planned to do in those months that would help them to reach their overall goal. The more ambitious tennis players indicated that they would continue practicing their serve and other skills, and also find sponsors, and participate in specific championships, thus allowing them to gain the necessary support and experience to compete at a professional level.

This activity was useful for older, more committed teenage athletes who possessed the abilities to assess their expectations and develop strategies that would help them to reach these goals but was not successful with younger children. More thought needs to be given to how one could adapt the questions and content of the picture frame format to make goal setting relevant and useful for young children.

Positive Self-Talk - Red Light Green Light

Many of these children and young athletes indicated that they usually (but not always) maintain a positive outlook during a game, even if things aren't going their way. Most of them also felt that having fun was more essential than winning every game. An activity was devised to reinforce and strengthen their skills at remaining positive and to offer positives solutions to those who

might sometimes think "I can't do this!" or "I'm no good!". I prepared a game to help the children learn to differentiate between positive and negative self-talk, and to identify how they could replace their negative thoughts with something more positive. Negative self-talk can and does affect the mood of the players, and leads to feelings of dejection or hopelessness. Negative thinking can affect the outcome of a shot or game, by reducing the level of effort or focus put into the shot or game (for example, if a player is thinking he or she cannot perform a certain task or win the game). For this reason, I wanted to encourage the young athletes to dispose of their negative thoughts if they arose during their athletic pursuit and replace them with statements that could help them to maintain a positive outlook.

For this game, the children were separated into two teams, and each team was given about twenty statements (some positive and some negative), ranging from "I am probably going to mess this up" to "I have a good serve" (or "drive", for the golfers). The players were asked to place the statements in boxes below the appropriate cardboard traffic lights. Negative statements were to be placed under the red traffic light, as they needed to stop thinking in a negative fashion. Positive statements went under the green light as this kind of thinking would give them the go-ahead and motivate them to continue with their positive thoughts and positive actions. A discussion then ensued, during which each of the statements was read by the players. When encountering a negative statement, I instructed the players to tell themselves to "Stop!" as soon as they realized that they were reading a negative statement or adopting a negative outlook, they were asked to replace it with something more positive, such as "I can do this!" or "I'll do my best!".

At the end of the game, I asked the children to come up with three positive statements they could use in their sport, thereby encouraging them to devise their own self-talk. Some great answers were given, from a simple “Go Team Go!” (from a hockey player) to “Play and act like a winner!”. This activity provided the children with some positive reminders to think about and a practical experience that they could readily integrate use into their tennis, golf, or hockey, as well as in other outside endeavors.

A positive component of this activity was the children learned the lesson in an enjoyable way without making it seem too much like “school”. Most of the children enjoyed getting together as a team and helping each other identify the nature of each statement. Some groups chose to divide the statements and each child was responsible for his or her own pile, while other groups designated individuals whose task consisted of placing all these statements in the appropriate boxes.

Lessons Learned

Insights

This internship was a great learning experience for me and for the children with whom I had the pleasure work. I had the chance to create material to enhance the efficiency and appeal of the sessions, to gather many valuable lessons on the applied field of mental training, and to gain a better understanding of the most efficient ways to respond to the needs of young children. Over the summer, one of my highlights was that I had the opportunity of learning from the children’s enlightening points of view, which they readily shared during the various activities. It was refreshing to hear their ideas and to discover that many felt that the most important part of playing a sport isn’t winning or losing, but rather, having fun. Some children shared the view that since

they can't win all of the time, they should focus on doing their best and having fun. One boy told the rest of the group that, we shouldn’t cry after losing because winning isn’t the point of participating in sport. He went on to say that we should keep a smile on our face and not worry too much about the end result.

I reinforced the importance of enjoyment through the mental skills training sessions, and encouraged these children to carry a positive and enthusiastic approach into all their activities.

The Sessions’ Appeal

I tried to make the material as stimulating as possible for all the children involved. Incorporating props and games that allowed them to learn while having fun often accomplished this. Over the course of this summer internship, it was a common occurrence for youngsters to arrive at the sessions and ask if this was going to be like school. I quickly reassured them that this wasn’t like school; it was something fun that they would actively participate in. The goal was for them to participate in discovering tools that may be useful in their athletic ventures, in the same way as practicing their physical skills in tennis, golf, and hockey, would lead to personal improvements. By the end of each weekly session, most of them left feeling that they were not attending a class but rather, benefiting from another component of their camp aimed at helping them maximize their efficiency in their sport and outside their sport.

It was crucial that I, as a mental training consultant, remained aware of the needs of the children, some of which was determined by their age, their energy level, and the sport in which they participated. It was harder to keep their interest when the activities involved a lot of writing. I had to trust my

creative instincts, and create or present material with more appeal, including games and colorful material that they welcomed.

Patience and positiveness on my part was also of primary importance throughout these sessions.

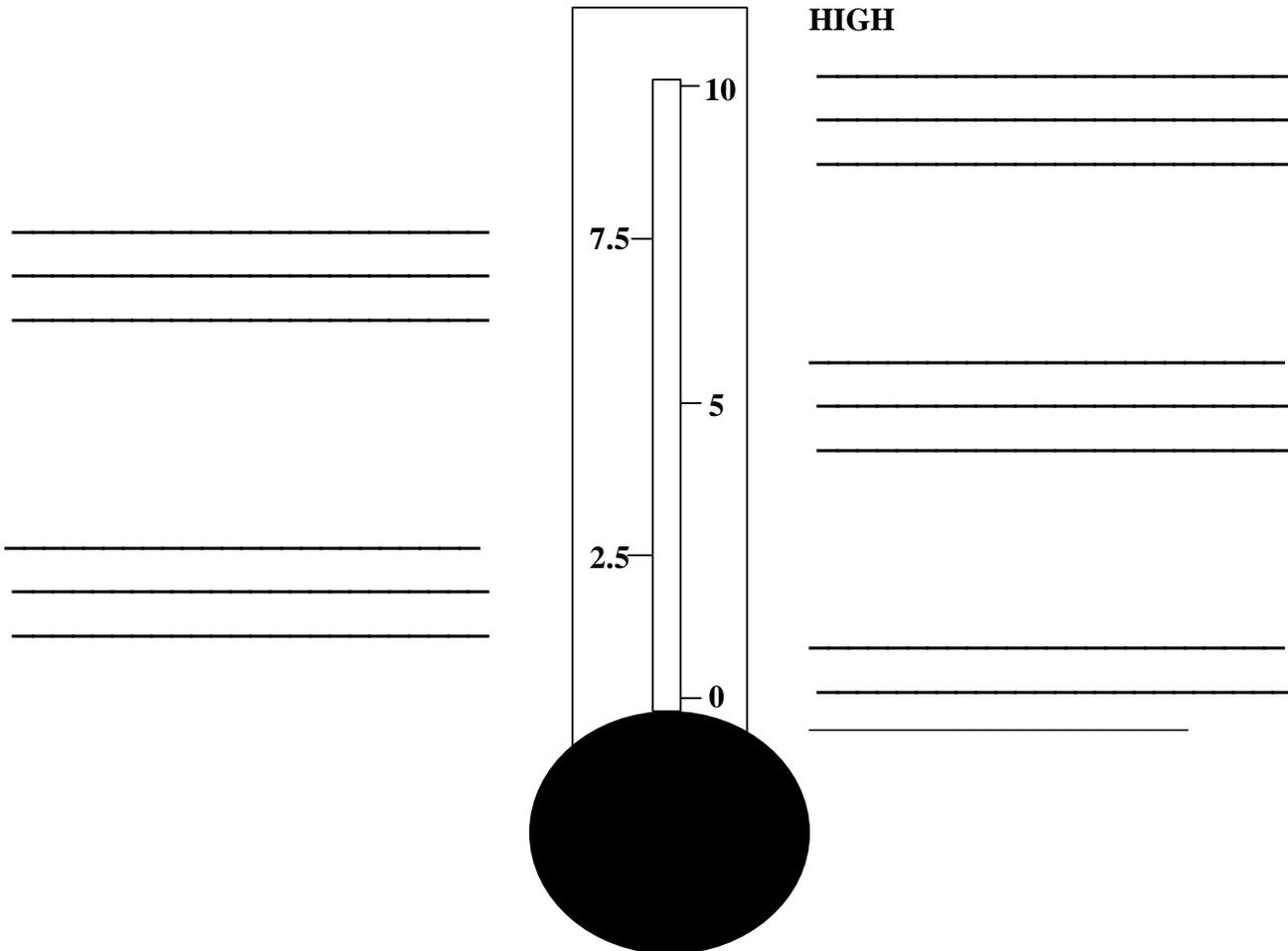
Conclusion

When I set out to offer additional help to these children for improving their athletic skills through mental skills training, my goal was simply to present them with strategies that they could easily integrate into their sport or day-to-day life. If I were to offer advice about working with such young performers, it would be to come prepared for any occurrence, and to not shy away from

creating activities that will immediately attract their attention. Furthermore, we must keep in mind the infinite wisdom of children. We often forget that children have much to teach us. They have many good thoughts to share and we must be ready to listen to what they may say. We must remain flexible and open-minded in order to learn from them.

I found my experiences in these summer sport camps to be truly enlightening and rewarding. Not only did I get the opportunity to gain important insights into my field of study and my consulting work, I also got the chance to work with such unique individuals who delighted me with their perspectives on the issues discussed!

Motivation Meter



BY: _____

Let's Play Tennis



I'm so good.
I won again!!
You should play
another sport

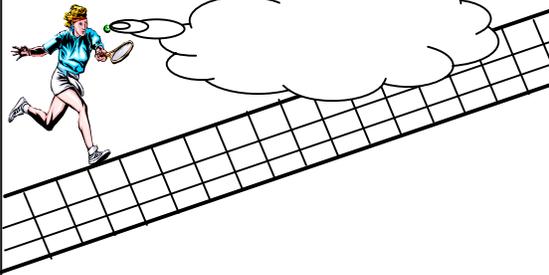
(My response)



Let's play
some more
tomorrow

Coach

The following
day...



(My response)



The End

BY: _____

Practice Makes Perfect



That's the 5th serve in a row that I missed! I will never be able to serve properly!



Coach

Don't give up! You just need a bit more practice. You'll have a great serve in no time.

Later that practice



(My response)



The End

References

Orlick, T. (1998). Feeling great: Teaching children to excel at living. Carp, ON: Creative Bound.