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Emotional intelligence: Could it be the answer to the age-old problem of emotions impacting on athletic performance?

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'We all lose it. Unfortunately, if you lose it at work, it doesn't get shown on TV. If I do, it does. For the people that were offended, I apologise. Your emotions can sometimes take control of you because you want it so badly, you're fighting out there, you're trying everything you possibly can. I tried to stop myself' (Greg Rusedski after an extraordinary outburst at Wimbledon, *Herald-Sun*, 27 June 2003).



Emotional intelligence: what is it?

Recent research at the South Australian Sports Institute, in conjunction with Swinburne University, has investigated the potential role of emotional intelligence in elite sport. Emotional intelligence is defined as 'the capacity to deal effectively with one's own and others' emotions'(Palmer and Stough 2001). Previous empirical studies in this area have indicated that the construct of emotional intelligence provides an athlete with an understanding of their specific emotional competencies, and therefore a better understanding and awareness of how to use emotions in sport.

By now, most coaches would have come across a variety of applied sport psychology methods and noticed that most techniques involve the athlete accessing their thoughts and emotions. Patterns of feelings and thoughts are crucial to psychological techniques such as cognitive behaviour therapy and mental skills training, as they allow less-functional aspects of behaviour to be recognised and consequently changed (Kauss 2001). Yet, what these current techniques lack is an objective method by which to measure emotional competencies. Although current sport psychology practices help identify particular behavioural and emotional patterns within an individual, few if any, have been able to provide a specific profile for successful athletic performance.

Measuring emotional intelligence in elite sport

Until recently, the role of emotional intelligence in performance had primarily been studied within the corporate environment or the workplace. Such research has indicated that individuals with better emotional intelligence typically perform with greater success than individuals who have less effective ways of dealing with emotions. As most people would agree, the 'workplace' of the elite athlete is both the competitive and training environment, yet it is during competition that an athlete's performance is ultimately evaluated.

Like IQ or heart rate, emotional intelligence is a measurable concept. Recent research at South Australian Sports Institute has found that emotional intelligence is best assessed within the competitive sporting environment using a General Sporting version of the Swinburne University Emotional Intelligence Test. A self-report measure, the General Sporting version of the Swinburne University Emotional Intelligence Test, consists of 64 statements related to how the individual recognises, expresses and understands their emotions during athletic performance.

Factors of emotional intelligence

- Emotional intelligence is made up of five specific components:
- emotional recognition and expression
- emotions direct cognition
- understanding others' emotions
- emotional management
- emotional control.

Factor	Definition
Emotional recognition and expression	Ability to perceive one's own emotions and emotional states and to effectively express one's inner feelings to team-mates/coach/ opponents
Emotions direct cognition	Extent to which one considers how one feels about different options when making decisions and problem solving, and how different choices might affect both oneself and team-mates/coach/opponents emotionally
Understanding of emotions (external)	Ability to perceive and understand the emotions of team-mates/coach/opponents and to understand the contexts in which they arise. To understand the appropriateness of team-mates'/coach's/opponents' emotional responses and behaviours
Emotional management	Ability to manage positive and negative emotions within both oneself and team-mates/coach
Emotional control	Effectiveness of control of emotional states from impacting on one's ability to work effectively and on their demonstrated behaviours

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Athletes need to identify how emotions influence the way they evaluate and analyse situations during competition. This helps the athlete to deconstruct habitual patterns of behaviour and the impact these behaviours can have on the way they interact within the team. Additionally, athletes need to develop more resourceful ways of reasoning about and appraising events to direct more effective behavioural outcomes.

Behavioural restructuring

Having established more resourceful ways of appraising and reasoning about events, athletes can be introduced to new ways of behaving. Like any new skill, the athlete must practise this new behaviour during training sessions.

How coaches can assess emotional intelligence in their athletes

Observing and debriefing with athletes after competition

Watch your athletes when they are competing and thoroughly debrief with your athletes afterward. Can you observe any signs that they are unable to successfully manage their emotions during competition? Are your athletes able to recognise and respond effectively to the emotions of their team-mates? Can they report on how they believe their emotions influenced their performance?

Assessment

The General Sporting version of the Swinburne University Emotional Intelligence Test allows athletes to self-report on their recognition, expression and understanding of their emotions during athletic performance. It provides athletes with an overall emotional intelligence score as well as five sub-scale scores that measure the specific components of emotional intelligence.

How coaches can help improve their athletes' emotional awareness

Education

Provide athletes with a basic understanding of the nature and function of emotions in their specific sport. By developing simple awareness in your athletes, they will come to recognise that they can use their emotions to their advantage during competition.

- Clearly explain the individual nature of optimal performance emotions.
- Make sure athletes recognise that both positive and negative emotions can be debilitating and facilitative during athletic performance, depending on their intensity.
- Emphasise emotion as a resource not a problem.

Individualisation

Having established a basic appreciation of emotions, it is essential that athletes recognise the influence that feelings have on them. Typically, athletes just experience their emotional responses when competing and do not stop to reflect on them critically.

- Written profiles and/or informal discussions with coaches can help athletes identify those emotions that are facilitating and debilitating.
- Having identified key emotions during competition, coaches should ask athletes to identify the specific situations, circumstances, events and thoughts that cause them.

Some basic tips for coaches

- Ask athletes to keep a journal documenting specific situations and the associated thoughts, feelings and behaviours.
- Use an open communication style so as to encourage athletes to be honest in appraising their emotions.
- Get athletes to pay attention to their emotions at certain points during a training session. Ask them to assess how their feelings have impacted on their behaviour.

References

Kauss, D 2001, *Mastering Your Inner Game: A self-guided approach to finding your unique sports performance keys*, Human Kinetics, Champaign, Illinois

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