



Providing information to individuals and teams seeking optimal performance

Self-Talk: An Asset or...?

Editor's note: This is the first of two newsletters about the concept of self-talk and its integral relationship to peak performance.

In the last issue of *Performance Enhancement News*, self-confidence was identified as a very important quality of successful athletes. How to begin to assess your own strengths and weaknesses was discussed, and several factors that can impact self-confidence were listed. One such factor, self-regulation, addresses the self-management of behavior, thoughts, and feelings. A primary component of self-regulation is managing self-talk.

We all experience an internal dialogue, or self-talk, whether we're aware of it or not. This dialogue can be as simple as reminding us to "turn left at the next light" or as complex as trying to make sense of a difficult situation such as a disagreement with a close friend.

Self-talk can also impact athletic performance. Consider the case of two sprinters: both are in the blocks and are waiting for the start of the 100 meter dash. The first is thinking, "Am I ready? Did I practice enough? I never get my timing off the blocks right!" The second is not thinking of much beyond the word, "Explode!" Assuming that both athletes have equal talent and have received equal training, which is more likely to have a better race?

Research on self-talk suggests that highly skilled athletes use their internal dialogue in a more planned and consistent manner than less skilled athletes who tend to be more reactive in their self-talk (Hardy, Hall, &

Hardy, 2004).

Planned self-talk can enhance skill development and performance in sport (Vealey, 2007). On the other hand, self-talk can be a liability "when it is negative, distracting to the task at hand or is so frequent that it distracts from the automatic performance of skills" (Zinser, Bunker, & Williams, 2001, p. 290).

Initially, many of the athletes that I work with tell me that they feel they have little or no control over their internal dialogue. Thoughts just come into their heads, usually at a bad time...

Most elite athletes will tell you that when they are performing at peak levels, they are not thinking about much at all. However, most athletes do have internal dialogues before, during, and after a performance and there are some things that you can do now to start gaining control over this process.

Identifying Self-Talk

Turning your self-talk into a tool that you control, instead of something that just happens, begins with identifying just what it is that you are saying to yourself. This is not as simple as it sounds as many people experience self-talk automatically and pay little, if any, direct attention to it.

Setting up a self-talk log is the start of increasing your awareness of both the frequency and the content of your internal dialogue. The simplest log can be made using a piece of paper with columns for date, situation (for example, before, during, or after

practice or competition), a rating of your performance during the situation (1-10 with a "10" representing "Performed perfectly" and a "1" representing "Just terrible"), and, of course, the actual internal comment, or comments, made during the situation.

Zinser, Bunker, and Williams (2001) note that you can use this log in three different ways. First, you can fill out the log as soon as possible after an athletic performance. Second, you can view tapes of your previous performances and recall what thoughts you were having. Finally, you can imagine your previous performances and identify your internal dialogue.

Once you have a good sample of your self-talk and the situations in which it occurs, you can judge whether your self-talk is an asset or hindrance to performance. In the next newsletter, we will discuss this issue along with tips on controlling your internal dialogue.

For more information about this topic or any other topic related to mental skills or sport psychology, contact your local sport psychologist.

Breaking News!

UAB Sport Psychology is pleased to announce that Dr. Moncier has recently attained Certified Consultant status from the Association for Applied Sport Psychology. He is one of only three such consultants in Alabama and is the only Certified Consultant in the North Alabama area.

This quarterly publication is being offered to you free of charge. You may share this newsletter with others as long as it is distributed in its entirety. If you prefer not to receive a copy, either call 256-551-4479 or send an email to moncierj@uasomh.uab.edu. Use these same methods to request additional copies of *Performance Enhancement News*, to request an electronic version, or to be placed on the mailing list. Back issues of *Performance Enhancement News* can be found on the web at: www.monciersportpsychology.com.

Dr. Jim Moncier is a licensed psychologist in Alabama and Florida. He is an assistant professor in Psychiatry and Family Medicine at the University of Alabama School of Medicine, Huntsville Campus. He is a Certified Consultant of the Association for Applied Sport Psychology and is a member of Division 47 (Exercise and Sport Psychology) of the American Psychological Association. His sport psychology practice includes work with athletes, coaches, and teams in high

school and collegiate sports such as basketball, football, golf, soccer, softball, tennis, track, volleyball, and wrestling.

To schedule a sport psychology consultation with Dr. Moncier, call 256-551-4479. Questions regarding sport psychology services can be directed to Dr. Moncier via email at moncierj@uasomh.uab.edu. Further information about either sport psychology in general or Dr. Moncier's practice in particular can be found at: www.monciersportpsychology.com.

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