



*Providing information to individuals and teams seeking optimal performance*

## Making Your Self-Talk a Performance Tool

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

In the past few issues of *Performance Enhancement News*, self-confidence was identified as one variable that consistently distinguishes successful from less successful athletes. Internal dialogue, or self-talk, was identified as an important part of self-confidence. It was noted that planned, productive self-talk can be an asset to athletic performance whereas negative, distracting, or too frequent self-talk can interfere.

In the March issue, readers were encouraged to begin the process of identifying their own self-talk through the use of a self-talk log. What follows assumes that you have at least casually used a self-talk log. For details on setting up such a log, see the March issue of *Performance Enhancement News*.

### *Does Your Self-Talk Help or Hurt Your Performance?*

Determining whether your self-talk helps or hurts your performance starts with a careful examination of your self-talk log. The first place to start is to look over the column that lists the comments you made to yourself.

Now look at the ratings attached to the comments you have written. If you are like most athletes, you will find that your most highly-rated performances will be associated with positive, productive internal dialogue, such as, "You can do this" or "Stay focused." You will also most likely find that your lowest-rated performances will be associated with negative, destructive internal dialogue, such as, "That was stupid" or "You never get your first serve in."

But what if at least some of your better performances happened when your thoughts were mostly negative? Contrary to popular belief, it is possible that both positive AND negative thinking can be helpful – under the right circumstances.

There is no doubt the traditional line of thinking has been that negative self-talk has a detrimental effect on sport performance (Harvey, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2002). However, recent research (Hamilton, Scott, & MacDougall, 2007; Van Raalte, Cornelius, Brewer, & Hatten, 2000) has suggested that this may not be the case for every athlete. In fact, for some athletes, negative self-talk *may* help by motivating them to improve their performance.

The bottom line is that you want to get a good idea of what type of self-talk you are usually using and what type of performance is associated with it. I recommend that you make logging your self-talk an on-going process. The more data you collect, the more information you will have and, the more confident you can be as you work to use your self-talk as a tool for better athletic performance.

### *Now What?*

Taking control of your self-talk is the key to using your internal dialogue to help your athletic performance.

While detailed information regarding managing your self-talk is beyond the scope of this newsletter, there are some general tips that any athlete can use once they have a good understanding of the patterns of their internal dialogue.

The first thing to consider is the old saying, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." If your self-talk is working for you, take advantage of it. Using your self-talk log as a guide, identify short, positive phrases that you can say to

yourself to keep yourself in the frame of mind you need to play your best.

If your internal dialogue is distracting or too frequent, a technique called "thought stoppage" (Meyers & Schleser, 1980) can be very helpful. I regularly teach two types of thought stoppage to athletes: saying "stop" when distracted or "popping" a rubber band worn on the wrist. Both effectively refocus attention. I also encourage the athlete to remind him or herself to "stay focused" afterwards.

Finally, there are numerous ways to help control detrimental negative thinking. All should start with a review of your self-talk log where you should look for phrases that come up with some regularity.

I generally teach two strategies to athletes. The first is called countering (Bell, 1983). Essentially, this means that once a negative thought runs through an athlete's mind, such as "I never get first serves in," the athlete immediately confronts the thought with factual information, such as "That's not true. On average, 50% of my first serves are good."

The second strategy is called redirection. This means responding to a negative thought by refocusing your thinking to a productive thought, such as reminding yourself of your game plan.

As with any mental skill, controlling your self-talk takes practice and consistency.

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

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### **Coming up in the next issue:**

Just what is "mental toughness?"

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