



Motivation - Why Do You Play?

At the recently concluded Beijing Olympics, Dara Torres won three silver medals in swimming events. At age 41, she is the oldest woman to swim in the Olympics. If you watched the televised coverage, you very likely saw the story about her amazing training regimen. That she would subject herself to the type of training required to return to the Olympics is a tribute to her self-professed motivation to compete. This feat becomes even more impressive when you consider that she gave birth to her daughter just 26 months prior to the 2008 Olympics.

One of the most common questions that coaches ask me is, "How can I motivate my athletes?" My usual first response is to ask, "Why do your athletes play?" Some coaches have an answer to this; some do not. As we will see, for most athletes, the answer is far from simple.

What Is Motivation?

Motivation is defined as the "psychological and social factors that impel a person to act and affect a person's levels of effort and persistence" (LeUnes & Nation, 2002, p. 114). To me, being motivated means that you have the willingness to work hard and to sustain this effort.

What Motivates People?

Why people are willing to work hard is the critical question and is highly dependent upon the individual. As implied above, one way that I try to get the answer to the question is to ask athletes (and coaches), "Why do you play?" On the surface, this is a simple question that athletes often take for granted, at least in my experience. However, for my work as a sport psychologist and a coach's work as a manager, the answer to this question reveals insight into the athlete that can be used to help motivate him or her to perform to the best of his or her ability. This is especially important when you consider that most athletes who have participated

in their sport for some time have made significant sacrifices in order to play including playing hurt, missing other activities, etc. There are reasons why they make these sacrifices.

One of the most famous pieces of research in this area was conducted by Ewing and Seefeldt (1996). They studied 8000 athletes and found that both male and female athletes ranked having fun as their top reason for participating in sport.

After fun, the genders differed somewhat as to why they participate in sports. However, within the top ten reasons, the general themes were consistent: excitement, competence, fitness, and social reasons.

In a newspaper interview last summer (DeWalt, 2007), I was asked why older adults continue to participate in sports. I thought this was an intriguing question and was frustrated when I found that there was little research in the area. Given this, I posed the question to a group of sport psychologists and, based on our work with older athletes, we came up with a list that was similar to the Ewing and Seefeldt (1996) findings: fun, competition, physical and mental health benefits, competence, and social reasons.

Factors that Influence Motivation

Many factors can impact an individual's level of motivation. For the current article, I will briefly focus on three: self-efficacy, attributions, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Self-efficacy was first defined by Bandura (1986) as a person's judgment regarding his or her ability to perform a particular task successfully. Thus an athlete's belief in his or her skills can influence motivation.

Attributions refer to how an athlete explains the reason(s) for the outcome of his or her efforts. Duda and Treasure (2001) state

that explanations for "poor and good performances in sport can be considered (in the mind of the athlete) to be more or less stable, internal or external, and controllable or uncontrollable" (p. 47).

A motivated athlete is one who accepts responsibility for his or her successes and failures. Using the notion of attributions, he or she sees, or attributes, his or her sport success as under his or her control, as linked to internal reasons (effort, for instance), and as stable or consistent. Motivated athletes are also more likely to explain failures as due to internal reasons (lack of effort, for example), controllable (and something that they can overcome), and due to unstable, or unusual, circumstances. An unmotivated athlete is more likely to see success as based on external, uncontrollable, and unstable factors. Failure is more likely to be seen by an unmotivated athlete as based on internal, uncontrollable, and stable causes.

Finally, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is a third factor that can influence how willing an athlete is to work hard for sustained periods of time. Intrinsic motivation describes the inner satisfaction athletes get from participation in their sport. Reasons are often revealed in the answer(s) to the question, "Why do you play?" Extrinsic motivation refers to external rewards an athlete can get by playing his or her sport. Examples can include tangible rewards (such as money, trophies, etc.) and status. However, you may be surprised to learn that external rewards are only moderately effective in influencing motivation (Burton & Raedeke, 2008).

In the December issue of *Performance Enhancement News*, we will look at how to apply this information in order to help motivate either you or your players.

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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Announcement: UAB Sport Psychology's Mental Toughness Course

As noted in the September 2007 edition of *Performance Enhancement News*, developing mental toughness is a process that is only now becoming more completely understood. UAB Sport Psychology is presently creating a course to help athletes develop the skills consistent with the emerging literature regarding mental toughness.

This course will focus on increasing the individual athlete's self-awareness of mental strengths and areas needing more work. Additionally, participants will learn a variety of mental skills used by elite athletes, such as emotion control and focus. With practice, the athletes will be able to use the above information to set up individualized pre-performance routines, regrouping plans, and general mental preparation strategies that will allow them to perform to the best of their ability. We will also discuss ways to incorporate mental toughness training into physical practice.

The course is expected to be offered in January of 2009. It will meet one night per week for 10 weeks at UAB-Huntsville. The course will be limited to 25 athletes ages 15 and older. Coaches can enroll in the course with the understanding that the focus will be on their mental toughness and not on how to teach mental toughness to their athletes. There will be homework between each class. At the end of the course, each participant will have a notebook that they can use to continue to guide them as they strengthen their mental toughness long after the class is over.

Information, including cost, start date, and other details will be listed on the website and in a mailing as soon as they are determined. If you would like to be contacted directly about this opportunity, either call Dr. Moncier at 256-551-4479 or send an email to moncierj@uasomh.uab.edu.