



What Can We Learn from Shannen Doherty?

On March 1, 2010, ABC announced the cast of the tenth season of its reality show, *Dancing with the Stars*. Included among the participants was former *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Charmed* actress, Shannen Doherty.

Soon after the announcement, Ms. Doherty gave several interviews that can help us understand her state of mind as she began preparing for the competition. On March 2, she told *People Magazine* that “I have a huge fear of live audiences... I break out in hives, full blown panic attacks, and everything else” (Ingrassia, 2010). On March 22, it was reported that she told Ryan Seacrest she was “nervous and freaking out,” was experiencing hives and stomach pains, and was having thoughts such as “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t” (Wigler, 2010). A little over a week later, she became the first celebrity eliminated from the show...

It may seem a bit unorthodox to focus on Ms. Doherty in this newsletter but consider what she is describing: fear, anxiety symptoms, and negative thinking. Have you ever experienced similar symptoms prior to a performance? We do not know how much effort and training she put into her preparation for the competition. However, based upon her interviews, it seems like a safe bet that the intensity of anxiety symptoms she stated that she was experiencing would not have helped her performance very much.

Performance Anxiety

Feeling some anxiety before a competition or performance is not only normal, but (as we discussed in the December 2009 issue of the newsletter) can actually help you perform better. Feeling anxiety before a performance is simply your body’s way of validating that the performance is important to you. However, the problem comes when the amount of anxiety is too much. So how do you know what the “right” amount of anxiety is for you?

Assessing Your Optimal Anxiety Level

Determining your optimal anxiety level is an important part of understanding where you need to be to perform at your best. There are several assessment instruments that I have used to help people figure out the “right” amount of anxiety for them, but for the purposes of getting you started, we will discuss a very simple method.

Get a piece of paper and make four columns. Label the columns “Date,” “Activity,” “Anxiety Rating,” and “Performance,” respectively. Date refers to the day that you are assessing yourself. Activity is either practice or competition (or performance) that you participated in that day. The last two columns use a similar scale but measure different things. First, measure the amount of anxiety you are feeling on a scale from 1 to 10. A rating of 1 means, “I am not feeling anxious at all” and a rating of 10 means, “I am so anxious I can barely walk straight.” Last, for performance, measure how well you performed also using a scale from 1 to 10. A rating of 1 means, “I have never performed worse” and a rating of 10 means, “I cannot imagine performing any better.” Fill out the first three columns for that particular activity before you participate (i.e., before practice or before a game). Fill out the last column after you are done.

Over time, you will start to notice some trends. For example, you may notice that you perform best when your anxiety level is around a 5 or that when your anxiety level is 7 or more, you have a bad practice or game. The important thing is to determine what level of anxiety works best for you.

Now What?

The next part of this process is to spend some time figuring out how anxiety at a certain level feels for you. It may help to review the two most common aspects of anxiety. Anxiety is usually made up of two

components: physical and cognitive. We discussed both in the October 2009 issue of the newsletter. To review, physical symptoms of anxiety can include a racing heartbeat, faster breathing, tightened muscles, dry mouth, and/or “butterflies” in the stomach. Cognitive, or mental, symptoms can include increased worry, negative thinking, and/or racing or intrusive thoughts. It is rare for any one person to have all of these symptoms. Most likely, when you get anxious, you get one or two.

As you fill out the form tracking anxiety level and performance, spend some time thinking about how each of the anxiety ratings feels. For instance, how does an anxiety level of 5 feel differently from a rating of a 7 or a 2? You may also find using imagery to be helpful. One way to do this is to spend some time after the practice or competition recreating the anxiety you felt that day in your head. Focus especially on first-person perspective and on bodily sensations such as those listed under physical anxiety above. The point is to help you further memorize what it feels like to be anxious at level 1, level 2, and all the way up to level 10.

You are likely to find that your optimal level of anxiety will vary depending upon the activity (i.e., taking a test vs. shooting a basketball). In the next issue, we will discuss some ways that you can use this information to help improve your own performance.

Note: All of the newsletters referenced can be downloaded from the website.

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

The next Mental Toughness Boot Camp starts in late September! See the website for details.

This bi-monthly 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 be placed on the mailing list. All back issues of *Performance Enhancement News* can be downloaded at no charge at: www.monciersportpsychology.com.

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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.

References

- Ingrassia, L. (2010, March, 2). Shannen Doherty: Dad's stroke inspired me to do DWTS. Retrieved July 19, 2010 from <http://tvwatch.people.com/2010/03/02/shannen-doherty-dads-stroke-inspired-me-to-do-dwts/>.
- Wigler, J. (2010, March 22). Shannen Doherty sizes up her 'Dancing With The Stars' competition. Retrieved July 19, 2010 from <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1634466/20100322/story.jhtml>.

Pre-Announcement: UAB Sport Psychology's Fall Mental Toughness Boot Camp

Developing mental toughness is a process that is only now becoming more completely understood. UAB Sport Psychology has created a course to help athletes develop the skills consistent with the emerging literature regarding mental toughness.

This course focuses on helping the individual athlete develop self-awareness of mental strengths and areas needing more work. Additionally, participants will learn a variety of mental skills used by elite athletes in order to further develop their own mental toughness, such as managing emotions, self-talk, and focus; managing energy; and using imagery as a performance tool. These skills form the basis of the individual athlete's pre-performance routines, regrouping plans, and general mental preparation strategies that will allow him or her to perform to the best of his or her abilities. Participants will also learn ways to incorporate mental toughness training into physical practices and their life in general in order to make the most out of both.

The course will begin in late September, 2010. It will meet on Monday nights for 10 weeks at UAB-Huntsville from 6:00-7:30 pm. The course will be limited to 15 participants ages 16 and older. 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. Dates, cost, and registration materials will be posted on the website by mid-August. Go to www.monciersportpsychology.com and follow the "Mental Toughness Boot Camp" link under the Services menu for more information. **We will continue to offer a discount for three or more participants from the same team or school who register at the same time. See the website for details.**

You can now hear Dr. Moncier on the radio on WUMP (730 AM or 103.9 FM) at 3:30 on Tuesday afternoons during "The Johnny 'Ballpark' Franks Show." If you are not in the North Alabama area or do not have access to a radio at work, you can listen to the show by directing your computer's web browser to www.730ump.com and clicking on the "On Air Now" link at the upper right corner of the page.