Psychological Skills Training to Adolescence Footballers – Today’s Perspective, Guide to Plan and Conduct

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Abstract

Background: The relationship between athletic peak performance and psychological training is well studied in various literatures on sports psychology. Insufficient awareness of the practical application of psychological skills training to athletes may not effective in handling psychological barriers. Methods: To encourage the benefit of sports players, a study may consist of all possible aspects of evaluation and a unique approach to address the psychological factors, such as stress, anxiety, etc. The purpose of this article is to fill the gap in the field of sport psychology and to meet the demand of sports players. This presented guidelines and suggestions could be useful for the researchers to import knowledge of psychological skill training to improve the mental skills of adolescent footballers. Conclusion: The practical application involves a systematic approach applied in a progressive manner in terms of the type of skills, volume of training, working intensity, specific need, and its recovery pattern.

Keywords: Psychological skill training, mental training, adolescence, football


1. Introduction:

In recent days sports and its participation has been given a lot of importance by children to the geriatric population and all genders, due to various health benefits and improvement in the quality of life (¹). Players of various levels of competition are working with their trainers, coaches, team players, and family members, to enhance their performances during and prior to the competition (²). Many studies have pointed out that more emphasis on physical skills training such as sprint, jump, etc, which results in overtraining leading to mild to severe injuries and may interfere and deteriorate athletic performances (²,³). According to Dr. Max Gerson, a successful combination of training requires synchrony of the physiological and psychological functions of the body to achieve restoration in its entirety. Psychological skill training is defined as a set of approaches addressing the mental, physical and psychological aspects of a person which causes an increase in performance during practice sessions and competition. It is a unique program consisting of well organized mental strategies by systematic training of different psychological skills, such as progressive relaxation, mental imagery, motivational self-talk, etc (⁴). Physical training is more beneficial if it could be combined with psychological skill training (PST), which may enhance the recovery process, and enhances performance, which includes progressive relaxation training by Jacobson, mental imagery training. All these techniques are of applied psychology help athletes to cope up with stressful situations and reduce arousal and anxiety (⁵, ⁶). Researchers in sports psychology has revealed that mental skills strategies are used to enhance athletic performance by

reducing and controlling the stress level and anxiety and to take appropriate decisions in a given stressful environment (7).

1.1 Football injuries in adolescence

Football is an interesting and popular team sport, players are frequently changing their positions and in the regularly changing game situation, it is found that there may be increased errors during the second half of the game due to various psychological and physiological factors. The incidence of football injuries are recorded to be third highest amongst other field games and are more common as the age increases. ‘WHO’ stated that children and adolescents have been showing interest in participating in field and track events and the same can be continued when they grow up to adulthood and may become champions if they improve their abilities and skills. Hence it would be beneficial to reduce such occurrences at younger ages, so that it may prevent the prevalence rate of such injuries in adult football players in the future (8). NCAA ISS have reported that 77.6% football athlete gets injured, and 55.9% & 38.8% injuries are encountered due to various physiological & psychological risk factors during practice & competition respectively (9). Adolescents are more prone to get injured due to many reasons such as growing articular cartilage, sustained repeated stress which results in more repetitive strain injuries than adult players, complete skeletal, cartilage maturity is not reached since adolescence is at growing age, and overtraining and inadequate rest, decrease in muscular flexibility due to prominent growth spurt, haphazard practice and related risk at the time of practice and competition. Physiological, Psychological, social development and behavior of an adolescent could be enhanced by participating in any such organized sports (4). Anxiety, self-esteem, personality traits & mental toughness are important psychological parameters that can be considered in order to determine the psychological behavior of a sports player. In order to overcome anxiety, stress during training and competition, researchers have spent valuable time to develop and evaluate the effects and benefits of PST on various sports players (10).

1.2 Mental toughness and the rationale

Mental toughness can be defined as an athlete’s ability to cope with various psycho-physiological demands of sports training and competition better than his opponent player (11). Applied psychology researchers have been carrying out research to find out how to apply psychological skill training and which technique is of importance in individual and team events. Thelwell&Greenleeshave identified two flaws while training an athlete with mental skills training - its inconsistency and justification to include which components in different sports, and subcomponents of the outcome (12). To overcome barriers such as anxiety, stress, and many other psychological confounding factors, many researchers have found out the different uses of psychological skills training consisting of single intervention in various sports (13), and recently many studies multiple intervention psychological skills training components are included to address the barriers faced by many athletes or players during practice and competition (14). Still, there exists a paucity about the practical guide to implementing PST on adolescent football players. Hence, it is suggested that to know the method of conducting mental skills training strategies should be presented.

1.3 Adolescence Sports Training in Schools:

Football training strategy includes sports-specific skills related to physical training, which includes a warm-up and cool-down phases. Psychological skill training may not be the choice of selection for many coaches and trainers due to inadequate knowledge and an unclear understanding of the practical application of PST. The aim of this study is to introduce practical aspects of psychological skill training to enhance mental capacity to overcome negative barriers and thus reducing mistakes during training and competition. Contents and strategies of the present study targets adolescent footballers as adolescence is the age of greater physical, psychological, physiological change and also transition phase from childhood to adulthood through adolescence. During this phase self-experimentation and exploration of various skills and concepts which may
change one’s development of physical, psychological, social, and cognitive phases. Their unique goal is to prove individualistic and various skills to attain a healthier life of adulthood (15).

2. Material & methods of Application of Psychological Skills Training:

By using Taylor’s 1995 conceptual model, adolescent psychological needs and demands required in the event of football will be analyzed by the researcher in the first meet in order to administer the techniques of PST successfully (16). This guideline study followed the principles laid down by Thelwell and Greenlees et al., about the selection of sets of components, which has to be included for footballers to enhance their competitive performances by integrating adolescent’s needs and demands (17).

2.1. Relaxation strategy:

This can be done in three steps.

Phase 1: Progressive muscular relaxation (PMR) (18)

Muscle Tension step: Firstly, focus on the target muscle group, breath in deeply, and tighten the targeted muscle groups as tight as possible and the same can be held for at least five to ten seconds and then relax it as much as possible and exhale completely, and the same can be repeated for the other group of muscles. PMR can be started from toes, feet, lower limb muscles, buttocks, trunk & chest muscles, muscles of fingers, hands, forearm, shoulders, neck, and face. The same can be repeated on the other side of the body.

Phase 2: Centering is the technique in which the subject’s attention is diverted to the most center part of the trunk and perform breathing in a rhythmic manner as deep as possible. This technique is used to make the subject feel his own breath reaching the central portion of his body and helps the subject to focus or concentrate on one task or goal that he wants to perform (19). This procedure gives a calmness and mental quietness to the subject and exchanges his different thoughts with central focusing on his breathing and helps him to focus properly without distraction or other psychological and environmental factors (17).

Phase 3: Diaphragmatic Breathing Exercises

Participants are requested to be in a seated position on a chair with back support and feet will be supported and eyes remain closed. Instructed subjects to place both the palms above the area of naval over the abdomen, asked to breathe in slowly and deeply through both of the nostrils and feels the palm popping up over the abdomen, and then breathe out through the mouth and feel the palms going down. The same can be repeated for five minutes with the fullest of attention and concentration (19).

2.2. Mental Imagery- (15 to 30 minutes):

Mental Imagery is defined as experiencing the situation internally in one’s mind which simulates a real-world environment when the eyes are closed. Subjects will be asked to imagine the different skills involved in the football game, i.e. tackling, passing correctly, shooting, sprinting, jumping, heading a ball, etc, many times and different skills which they wanted to improve. The explanation will be given in such a way that the one who is imaging would think continuously the skills which are involved in-game such as shooting a ball to the goal post from the point where one stands. This also involves the vision of the ball, from the point where it’s kicked and rolling of the ball towards the goal post and finally, it gets inside the goal post and tackling, passing, shooting into the net in the correct direction repeatedly. The same can be practiced in different positions of one’s play and during training or even during the competition (17,20).

2.3. Positive Rephrasing technique (During Practice or competition):

Subjects will be asked to make a very short and motivational or phrase or cues of their wish and idea depends on their performance during football practice or competition. Phrases like, “you can do it” “good” “excellent kick” “come on” “easy” “run quickly” “tackle it” “cool” “don’t be
stressed” “reach” “balance” etc. The same phrases can be told loudly or gently within themselves to keep them focused on the situation where they feel stressed or anxious about their performance. It can be performed many times during their practice session or competition\(^{(17, 20, 21)}\).

3. Results and Discussion:

The present study could be beneficial to add the practical aspect of understanding PST and its application. Summarizing all facts in sports psychology in-terms of mental training, one needs to consider a unique perspective during the designing phase and while administering such techniques especially the adolescent population. Having discussed various gaps in the practical application of PST, Balague has presented a practical framework of psychological skill training and its stages of application. Application of mental training includes the following four progressive stages, 1) Psychological skill foundational or preparatory stage, 2) learning & development or competition stage, 3) game-oriented specific mental skills stage and 4) psychological skill recovery & maintenance stage. These relevant psychological tools are necessary for each stage will be energetically learned and practiced effectively\(^{(22)}\). In addition to this periodization of mental skills was developed by Hammermeister\(^{(23)}\).

This framework consists of different sets of mental skills, and applied or trained systematically in a progressive manner in terms of the type of skills, the volume of training, working intensity, specific need, and its recovery pattern\(^{(24)}\). Robert D. Friedberg et al have used feedback forms after the session of cognitive training in the PANDY project which involves children and adolescence and claimed to be useful during cognitive training when the participants process it verbally with the therapist after submitting their written feedback forms\(^{(25)}\). AmàelArguel, Eric Jamet, has studied and highlighted the benefit of using static pictures with dynamic i.e. video during cognitive training and found to have better cognitive learning than pictures alone, and also video alone can be enhancing cognitive learning. Combination of instructions while playing dynamic pictures or video and lesser frequencies of pictures or videos are found to be beneficial in learning cognitive type of training\(^{(26)}\).

4. Conclusion:

Literature in applied psychology strongly suggests that psychological skill training produces more positive changes in athletic performances by controlling and conditioning mindset in spite of many psychological barriers like stress, tension, anxiety, etc which they face during competition or training. It is important to keep one’s optimal performance during competition by adapting and learning well structured mental training. This consists of a clear understanding of specific tasks that are supposed to be used during practice and competition. The practical application of such training involves a systematic approach applied in a progressive manner in terms of the type of skills, volume of training, working intensity, specific need, and its recovery pattern. The magnitude and speed of learning may not be the same when a group of people participates in such type of psychological skill training; hence it is very crucial to advocate PST in different phases. Due to the complexity involved during initial phases of mental training, it is always advisable to use the combination of instructions with dynamic pictures or videos and limited numbers of pictures or videos can benefit the participants during cognitive learning. To make active participation of all the subjects it is suggested to clarify the doubts or queries during mental training and also very important to obtain a periodic written feedback form after completing the sessions. However, there is great difficulty in estimating the benefits of mental or cognitive training as there are numerous factors affecting the psychological well-being of a sports player. It is imperative to assess in-depth assessment of present and past negative, positive events in one’s life.

5. Ethical Clearance: Not applicable

6. Source of Funding: Self-funded

7. Conflict of Interest: Nil

8. Acknowledgments

http://doi.org/10.36295/ASRO.2020.231764
I would like to thank Lord Jesus for this great opportunity, and I would like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Urvashi Rathod, Dr. S D Pohekar, Dr. Anjali Kedari, Dr. Mahboob for their valuable support & guidance, M.A.Rangoonwala College of Physiotherapy and Research for allowing me to complete this study, and special gratitude and thanks to my parents and children for their constant co-operation and encouragement.

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