

Daniel Rodriguez, Ph.D., PsychoAdaptation Consulting

## Special Points of Interest:

- *Success is subjective*
- *Feedback should focus on self-improvement rather than outcomes*
- *Imagery is an excellent stress management technique*
- *Personalize your imagery scripts*

## LEARNING AND MOTIVATION

We often hear that the goal of sport should be fun. We are told by the experts to de-emphasize winning. Indeed, in many children's sport leagues scores aren't kept and organizers make sure that all participants receive trophies just for being involved. That's a good strategy to motivate kids to stay in sport. Eventually, though, winning comes to the forefront. It's impossible to keep *competition* out of *competitive sport*. Whether we believe sport should or should not include competition and winners and losers, human beings are innately competitive. Even in the most benign environment, kids will start to segregate by ability.

Children become more realistic with age. Research on *competence beliefs* suggests that as children get older, self-evaluations become more accurate. This results from an increasing propensity to compare ourselves and our performance to others rather than to our own past performance. From a psychological perspective, accurate self-perception is benign and should be encouraged. From a sport perspective, it can be limiting and decrease participation motivation.

Motivation is a complicated phenomenon. Researcher Susan Harter of the University of Denver proposed that motivation is the product of

a complex interaction between one's experience and environment. At the most basic level, success increases motivation whereas failure decreases motivation. This is likely why perceptions of competence become more accurate as we age; we experience a great deal of failure in life. According to Harter's competence motivation theory (CMT), failure reduces positive affect and perceived competence, and this in turn decreases intrinsic motivation (motivation to play for the sake of playing). Failure by contrast increases *extrinsic motivation* (performing to attain reward or avoid punishment).

Success (continued, page 2)

## IMAGERY: USING YOUR MIND'S EYE

Many athletes associate sport psychology with guided imagery. This is due in large part to the popularity of W. Timothy Gallwey's classic "The Inner Game of Tennis". Indeed, after reading this seminal work, I started using imagery when serving. Yet, over time I've developed imagery more for relaxation than performance enhancement.

Learning imagery is like learning any other skill, it requires

practice. To begin, get yourself a tennis ball and find a *comfortable and safe place* to practice. Holding the tennis ball in your hand, close your eyes and be mindful of the ball, using all of your senses. What does it smell like? Can you feel its fuzziness? Rotate it in your hand in every direction. See if you can imagine it visually. Do this until you can clearly see the ball in your mind's eye. Note that there

are individual differences and some will master this task faster than others. Thus, take your time to master it *for yourself*. Put the ball down.

Now, without the actual ball in hand, I want you to imagine the tennis ball with all of your senses. If helpful, pretend that you are holding the real tennis ball in your hand, just as you did earlier (continued, page 2).

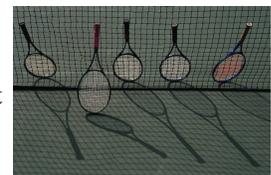
Daniel Rodriguez, Ph.D.  
(215) 262-4791  
drodrig63@yahoo.com

### Tip of the week

Make sure you have the right equipment for your sport, including shoes. If you are not sure what you should have, ask your coach for tips

on purchasing the right equipment.

Also, just because you are involved in a sport doesn't mean you have to buy the most expensive equipment. For instance, tennis racquets vary in price. A really good racquet can cost up to \$300. The question is, do you really need that expensive a racquet? Conversely, if you are elite player, playing in USTA tournaments, is one racquet enough? You may want to have a second and identical racquet for when your strings break. In all cases, it's best to ask your coach what you need.



## PSYCHOLOGY AND SPORT WEEKLY

### LEARNING AND MOTIVATION (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

has the reverse effect. Success increases positive affect and perceived competence. It also increases mastery motivation and intrinsic motivation. The obvious answer to happiness then is success. The problem of course is that we CAN-NOT guarantee success as our opponents have a say in a competitive outcome.

Fortunately, success and failure tend to be as much subjective as objective. Thus, how we perceive outcomes determines motivation. Otherwise nobody would persevere after an objective failure. Indeed, there are countless examples of people rising up after a failure to go on and even win championships. A good example is gymnast Kerri Strug who vaulted the US women's team to the 1996 Olympic gold medal despite a sprained ankle and a poor score on her first vault.

*“Learning in sport is a long and slow process, knowing where to focus one’s efforts is crucial, and having social support is essential.”*



*To enhance your relaxation, don’t forget diaphragmatic breathing.*

According to CMT, how one perceives success and failure depends to a large extent upon feedback. Coaches, peers, and parents provide feedback. If this feedback is encouraging and informative, explaining what was done correctly and incorrectly, one learns to see successes where others see failure. For instance, to hit a forehand well one must swing the racquet from low to high to ensure that the ball goes over the net and lands inside the baseline. If a tennis player hits the ball into the net and a coach points out that the racquet was not swung low to high, that’s good feedback. If the athlete consequently swings the racquet from low to high but the ball sails past the baseline, good feedback would include praising the tennis player for the correct technique and pointing out that even though the ball went

out, it was hit better than the last. Now, instead of perceiving failure, the athlete sees a success; the stroke was executed better than the last stroke. Perhaps by continuing to focus on swinging low to high, the ball will go in!

Learning in sport is a long and slow process. Knowing where to focus one’s attention is crucial, and having social support is essential. Thus, to help develop intrinsically motivated athletes who are committed to mastering challenges, and are ready to endure setbacks, coaches and parents must help athletes learn where to focus attention. The benefits are many and great, including a desire to master other challenges, happiness, and most important, a love for playing the game for its own sake. This is important as we want kids to be active for a lifetime of physical and mental health!



*We cannot guarantee outcomes but we can guarantee our own effort.*

### IMAGERY: USING YOUR MIND’S EYE (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

Make sure you can visualize the ball clearly. Can you see the logo on the ball? What does it say? Can you see each letter? Can you smell the ball? Does it smell new, like you just opened a fresh can? What does it feel like? Can you feel the fuzziness? Can you feel the seams? Spend as much time as necessary to master this task. If you cannot see, smell, or feel the tennis ball in your mind’s eye, grab the actual tennis ball and start all over again. The point of this exercise is learning. Expertise is a long and slow process.

Next, imagine yourself tossing and catching the ball. As it’s rising and falling, try to visualize the seams and the logo. As

you catch it, feel the pressure of the ball landing in your hand. Then, bounce it several times just as you would if you were about to serve the ball. As you bounce it, try to hear the sound of the ball hitting the ground. Again, spend time with this activity until you master it. Tailor it to your individual style. Perhaps you’d like to use a pink tennis ball, or add a friend and toss it back and forth.

Once you’ve mastered tossing the ball, add a tennis racquet and do the same with the racquet as you did with the tennis ball. Imagine the feel of the racquet in your hand, including its weight and physical appearance. Then, just like

you do at home in your free time, start bouncing the ball up and down on the strings. Make sure to listen to the sound of the ball bouncing off the strings. Continue this step until you have mastered seeing, feeling, hearing, and smelling all the cues you’d normally experience playing tennis.

Once done, notice how relaxed you are after compared to before starting. I recommend repeating this exercise daily and even personalizing your imagery scenario. For instance, imagine yourself practicing at the beach or on a rooftop court. Have fun with it and don’t forget to breathe. We’ll add more later, including practicing hitting!