

Motivating Athletes towards Attaining and Sustaining Peak Performance Using Counselling Skills and Strategies

Fidel O Okopi

Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance learning
National Open University of Nigeria Lagos
okopifidel@yahoo.co.uk, fokopi@noun.edu.ng
+2348023509179

Abstract

This paper views motivating athletes for attaining and sustaining peak performance from the perspective of understanding the uniqueness of an individual athlete's personality, sources of his or her motivation within and outside sporting environment and relatedness to other athletes and other professionals with sports milieu. The process of understanding the uniqueness of an individual athlete and different ways each athlete is motivated can best be achieved through counselling process. This process will require a sport psychologist establishing, and maintaining therapeutic relationship and effective working alliance with individual athlete and significant others within and outside the athlete's sporting environment. This is because no two athletes are the same in their attitudes, interests, behavioural patterns, emotional responses, social roles and other traits that endure over long period of time. For this reason, no single strategy can serve as effective and meaningful source of motivation for all athletes and teams in all situations. The paper stresses the need for sport counselling psychologists and coaches to develop personal qualities and counselling skills that can enable them to galvanise working alliance between the individual athletes and coach, trainer, parents and team administrators towards creating social support net for the benefit of helping the athletes realise their dreams. The paper recommends ways of enhancing athletes' feeling of competence and autonomy and to become more proactive in their sport environment in relation to peak performance

Key words: motivating athletes; attaining and sustaining peak performance; counselling skills and strategies; therapeutic relationship.

Introduction

Motivation is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon influenced by internal and/or external forces that lead to the initiation, direction, intensity and persistence of behaviour. Vallerand (2004) reveals that, the widely accepted definition of motivation is that, it represents the hypothetical construct used to describe the internal and/or external forces that lead to the initiation, direction, intensity and persistence of behaviour. He further explained that one of the difficulties in defining motivation is that, it is not directly

observable, thus, to define motivation, one must look at the behaviour consequences in order to determine whether the individual is motivated or not.

The two broad types of motivation that have been studied widely are intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Vallerand (2004) posits that, intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity for itself and for the pleasure and satisfaction derived from participation. Within the intrinsic motivation, Vallerand and his colleagues proposed and showed that, there are at least three types of intrinsic motivation: intrinsic motivation to know (engaging in the activity for the pleasure of learning); intrinsic motivation towards accomplishments (engaging in the activity for the pleasure of trying to surpass oneself) and intrinsic motivation to experience stimulation (engaging in the activity out of sensory and aesthetic pleasure) (Vallerand, 2004)

On the other hand, extrinsic motivation is when an individual does not engage in the activity out of pleasure but rather does so to derive some kind of rewards that are external to the activity itself (Vallerand, 2004). Deci and Ryan (1985) identify different types of extrinsic motivation that vary in terms of their inherent levels of self determination. These types of extrinsic motivation are external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation and integrated regulation. External regulation refers to behaviour that is regulated through external means such as obtaining rewards (e.g. Medals, trophies) and avoiding constraints (e.g. Social pressure) (Vallerand, 2004) In his article on the hierarchical model, Vallerand (1997) also proposes the existence of amotivation which he refers to as lack of purpose and intentionality in one's action. According to him, amotivation amounts to the relative absence of motivation.

According to Karageorghis and Terry (2011) , studies have shown that, it is actually important for an athlete to have a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. They reasoned that, this is because intrinsic motivation will push the athlete to better themselves and enjoy their sport whilst extrinsic motivation will ensure that they want to win and have a strong competitive streak. They went further to explain that people tend to gravitate towards specific sports for the following reasons

- 1) They find the sport particularly interesting and rewarding
- 2) They are encouraged to participate in the sports by friends, coaches or family member
- 3) They feel competent in performing the skills integral to the sport
- 4) They are exposed to the sport from a young age
- 5) They have a social network within the sports
- 6) They use sport as a path to excellence
- 7) They find that sport promotes health and fitness

Karageorghis and Terry's (2011) states that, research finding has shown that athletes who have the best motivational outcomes such as persistence, a positive attitude and unflinching concentration, tend to be both extrinsically and intrinsically motivated. According to them extrinsically motivated athletes tend to become discouraged when they do not perform to expectations and experience a down ward form. Conversely, athletes who are predominantly intrinsically motivated often do not have the competitive drive to become champions. This is because they tend to enjoy mastering that tasks that comprise

their chosen discipline but they lack a strong competitive streak in the personalities. For the reasons mentioned above, athletes need mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

However, Karageorghis and Terry (2011) argue that, combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motives do not hold for young athletes and in particular prepubescent athletes. Coaches and parents should work together to create a positive motivational climate for young athlete. Research has shown that the motivational climate can be performance oriented, which focuses on social comparison and winning or mastery oriented, which focuses on self-referenced goals and feeling of competence

For adult athletes, high performance levels may be stimulated partly by the tangible rewards that sports provides but still the emphasis should be on the fun associated with participation (Karageorghis & Terry, 2011). It is much more important to be highly intrinsically motivated than to be highly extrinsically motivated. Being driven solely by extrinsic motives is not psychologically healthy because the lack to intrinsic motivation can lead the athlete to quit or seriously question his or her involvement. Many Personality and environmental factors influence variation in motivation at each level. Explore how an athlete and his or her support team might work towards enhancing athlete's level of motivation. Establishing why an athlete is involved in sport, helps to avoid inner conflict, allowing athlete to aspire towards peak performance (Karageorghis and Terry 2011).

Factors Influencing Motivation

From the foregoing discussion, two broad variables seem to have profound influences on athletes 'motivation. These factors are: individual athlete's personality and social environment in which the athlete operates at specific time. The social environment involves situational variables that are present at a given time. According to Deci and Ryan's Self – Determination Theory, Social factors influence motivation through their impacts on one's perception of competence, autonomy and relatedness. This is because individuals experience the needs to feel competence, autonomous and the related to significant others in their interaction with the environmental activities that allow people to satisfy these needs, make them to engage in choice-fully and on a regular basis (Vallerand, 2004) . In other words, athlete's needs to feel connected to others in the sport milieu, to behave in an effective manner in that milieu, and to experience a sense of personal initiative in the process are the very important and powerful tools of motivation. Variables that nurture those needs help motivation and identified regulation to flourish. Research has shown that the impact of the environment on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is indeed mediated by perception of competence, autonomy and relatedness (Vallerand, 2004).

According to Vallerand, (2004) though, relating to significant others in their interaction can have a very important impact on athletes situational motivation, yet athletes who play in the same team and who are subjected to the same environmental conditions often display different levels of situational intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. This phenomenon can occur because athletes may differ in respect to their motivational

orientation.. The paper therefore proposes that, in order to understand the individual athlete's feel competence, autonomous and his or her relatedness to significant others within sporting environment, vis-à-vis peak performance, will require identifying the sources of individual athlete's motivation through establishment, promotion and maintenance of therapeutic relationship. This has become very imperative bearing mind that, no two athletes are the same in their attitudes, interests, behavioural patterns, emotional responses, social roles and other traits that endure over long period of time. According to Anderson, Miles, Mahoney & Robinson, (2002), no one formula can provide effective and meaningful interventions for all athletes and teams in all situations. Whilst trying to motivate athletes for attaining and sustaining peak performance, it is crucial for sports psychologists, coaches and parents to understand the uniqueness of individual athlete and different ways each athlete is motivated and this understanding of the athlete can best be achieved through counselling process.

Counselling Theories

For the purpose of this paper, the writer will rely on Humanistic Psychology as a guide. Humanistic therapy techniques are designed to guide a client to make alternative choices about their life or personal ideals (Pottratz, 2013). The Humanistic approach that is more akin to counselling psychology was developed by Carl Rogers (1951), known as client-centred therapy. This approach focuses on the client's self-concept and how they can achieve ultimate fulfilment (self-actualisation) (Pottratz, 2013). Pertinent to client-centred therapy, is a strong, trusting relationship between the client and counsellor. Within the counselling psychology profession, the personal qualities of the practitioner, such as empathy and congruence, are considered to play a significant role in developing an effective therapeutic relationship with a client, which in turn will dictate the quality of the therapeutic outcome (Corey, 2009). The same could therefore be said for a sport psychologist seeking to operate in a similar manner (Hack, 2005).

Therapeutic relationship is specialised helping relationship between the therapist/counsellor and client(s). However Clarkson (1999 viii) indicates that person-to-person relationship exemplified in Rogerian counselling is a paradigmatic example of the therapeutic relationship. According to Khan (1999 p28), Rogers' pursuit of goal setting out with the client, is not aimed at solving one particular problem or presented problem but for the client to grow, in a way that facilitate the growth of autonomous, developing coping strategies that will have more generalised application in the whole of the client's life. Also Rogers' (1942: 233) concept of growth is growth towards more autonomous, responsible and confident living which is based on creation of a relationship, a therapeutic climate, which of its nature encourages, permits and enhances therapeutic movement in the client. Rogers used self disclosure as a means of establishing more symmetric relationship. Effective counselling consists of a definitely structured permissive relationship which allows the client to gain an understanding of himself or herself to a degree which enables him or her to take positive steps in the light of this new orientation (Rogers, 1942, 18). According to Strupp (1986), counselling may be regarded as developing, maintaining and managing a specialised human relationship with therapeutic intent. Egan (1986)

acknowledges that, the prime responsibility for creating that relationship called a therapeutic climate lies with the therapist, who must be congruent in the relationship.

The concession, among the authors above is that, the effectiveness and efficiency of a counsellor in counselling process lies with his or her ability to communicate to the client his or her empathic understanding and unconditional respect for him or her (Okopi,2013). The counsellor must be perceived by the client as being in congruent, genuine, honest, and non judgemental in accepting him or her, thus making it imperative for the counsellor to acquire both generic skills, receptive and responding skills in order to establish, promote and maintain a genuine helping relationship. According to Okopi (2013) the communication of the generic skills, receptive and responding skills by the counsellors to the clients will encourage the clients' self disclosure or continuous readiness to learn new coping skills and be motivated to change their life strategies. The communication of counsellors' attributes to the clients, forms the pillar of building a therapeutic relationship and this could be achieved through face-to face contact, telephone, audio and videotapes, Internet, audio conferencing, facsimile machines, and real-time video (Okopi,2013) .

Basic counselling skills

Apart from personal qualities a sport psychologist or, counsellor or coach brings to the relationship, a professional must learn the basic counselling skills required in establishing the therapeutic relationship. Drab (2014) opines that, increasing research findings have shown that the type of therapy used is not important to the outcomes as are specific counsellor's behaviour such as enthusiasm, confidence and belief in the client's ability to change. He further explained that, the counsellor's interaction with the client is a powerful tool in establishing a helping relationship and proposes ten basic skills that every counsellor, sport psychologist and coach should acquire:

The influence of personality and environmental factors on athletes' motivation has made it imperative for psychologists, coaches and administrators to realise that, the sources of motivation among athletes vary greatly and each athlete is a unique individual and should be treated as such. Establishing and maintaining of therapeutic relationship with individual athlete and working alliance with significant others in sports environment, is the major precursor to understanding the athlete's personality. The counsellor or the sport psychologist must be perceived by the client as being in congruent, genuine, honest, and non judgemental in accepting him or her, thus making it imperative for the counsellor or sport psychologist to acquire both generic skills, receptive and responding skills in order to establish, promote and maintain a genuine helping relationship

According to Hack (2005) cited by Chandler, Eubank, Neati, & Cable , (2014), in recent years, the field of applied sport psychology has broadened to encompass not only the use of problem-solving approaches concerned with mental skills training, but also more humanistic, person-centred approaches that utilise skills grounded in counselling. Within the counselling psychology profession, the personal qualities of the practitioner,

such as empathy and congruence, are considered to play a significant role in developing an effective therapeutic relationship with a client, which in turn will dictate the quality of the therapeutic outcome (Corey, 2009). The same could therefore be said for a sport psychologist seeking to operate in a similar manner (Chandler, et al 2014)

It is important for sport psychologists, counsellors, coaches and administrators to understand how each athlete is motivated in different ways and will respond to different types of motivators (Mark. 2013) Sport Psychologists and significant others within sport milieu must not assume that the same motivational strategy works for all athletes in all situations or even the same athlete in all situations. For this reason, when it comes to implementing motivational strategy, such strategy must be individualised based on the knowledge and understanding of the athlete concerned. (Brodie, October,2)

When it comes to motivating athletes, sport psychologists or counsellors must endeavour to help coaches, and significant others to become more supportive in their interacting styles, thereby enhancing athletes feeling of competence and autonomy; teach athletes how to deal with the increase levels of competence and autonomy and to become more proactive in their interpersonal relationships with significant other within sport environment. Coaches adopting more supportive approach help their athletes to experience higher levels of competence and autonomy, higher levels, of intrinsic motivation, and higher levels of persistence (Mark. 2013). This is why it is so crucial to build rapport and thoroughly understand each athlete and how he or she perceives a particular motivator at a particular situation. Knowing your athletes before prescribing the motivational intervention strategies to be adopted is the most beneficial and meaningful step to be taken. Sports counselling can assist in the development and forge professional relationships among sports people - athletes, coaches and managers and add to the overall performance and enjoyment of the athlete's chosen sport (Mark. 2013).

As rightly observed by Katz and Hemming (2010) there is lack of publications that focus explicitly on the role of the professional relationship between the psychologist and athlete. They posited that, effective counselling skills within the context of working alliance are viewed as being central to promoting constructive psychological change. Sport Counselling psychologist and coaches should adopt a humanistic approach seeking to establish and maintain therapeutic relationship, rapport and effective working alliance with an individual athlete and significant others in sports environment as the first line of getting to know the individual athlete better and galvanise social supports for him or her. The sport psychologist/ counsellor must genuinely respect the athlete as a unique self-regulating individual without regard to any subjective evaluation. The sport counsellor should be able to grasp the internal frame through which the client perceives his environment. This will enable him to appreciate the athletics experience as if he was using the same framework of perception as the athlete. Accurate empathy involves both the ability to sense or experience the current situation from the client internal frame of reference and the ability to appropriately communicate the experience to the client (Okopi, 2004).

The counsellor should be able to help athletes by providing individualized feedback through team involvement. The sport counsellor must be a hard working individual who

deeply cares about the athletes and team he works. He must have the abilities to translate psychological principles and findings into concrete practical terms that athlete can understand. According to Hardy; Jones and Gould (1996) developing mutual trust and respect with coaches and athletes, it is also important to recognize that elite athletes and coaches are often sceptical of new people because they are often approached by people who only want to know them for their celebrity status or because they want something from them. The counsellor must be patient because it takes time to develop trust.

According to Csikszentmihalyi's (2002) concept of flow has also been related humanistic sport psychology. He explained flow is a state of consciousness where one becomes totally absorbed in what they are doing, so that all other thoughts and emotions are excluded. Flow has been associated with peak performances where the body and mind work effortlessly as one. He propose nine dimensions of flow in sport; clear goals, concentrating, loss of feeling of self-consciousness, distorted sense of time, feedback, balance between ability level and challenge, control, activity is intrinsically rewarding, and being absorbed in the activity. Finding the perfect balance is difficult but necessary (Jackson &Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). The feeling of being in control of the situation is one of the things that stands out the most to athletes who experience flow, and is a key aspect of humanism as well as it emphasises humans' ability to make their own choices and take responsibility for those choices. The above mentioned qualities are akin to athlete's feeling of competence, autonomous and his or her relatedness to his environment and these can be enhanced through the establishment and maintenance of therapeutic relationship

Conclusion

Counsellor's ability to develop trust and respect with coaches and athletes are germane to the understanding of an athlete's attitudes, interests, behavioural patterns, emotional responses, social roles and other traits that endure over long period of time. Also in this vein, serve as precursor to the establishment and maintenance of therapeutic relationship, rapport and effective working alliance within the sport environment vis-à-vis motivating athletes for sustainable peak performance. For Sport counsellor, coaches and significant other effectively assist athletes in coping with performance anxiety, general anxiety and depression, reducing stress, overcoming fear of failure, coping with success and burnout, family and marital difficulties, recovering from inappropriate coping strategies such as drug and alcohol abuse etc, it is incumbent on sport psychologists to adopt counselling strategies.

References

- Anderson,A., Miles,A., Mahoney,C.,& Robinson, P (2002) Evaluating the athlete's perception of the sport psychologist's effectiveness: What should we be assessing? *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*,5 255-227

- Chandler, C., Eubank, M., Neati, M., & Cable, T (June, 2014) Personal Qualities of Effective Sport Psychologists: A Sports Physician Perspective *Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research. Volume 61, Issue 1, Pages 28–38, ISSN (Online) 1899-4849, ISSN (Print) 2081-2221, DOI: 10.2478/pcssr-2014-0003, June 2014*
- Clarkson, P. (1995). *The therapeutic relationship*. London: Whurr
- Corey, G (2008) *Theory and practice of counseling*. 8th Edition Belmont, C.A Thomson Brooks/Cole
- Csikszentmihalyi, M (2002) *Flow: The Psychology of Happiness: The Classic Work on How to Achieve Happiness*. Human Kinetics Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California
- Drab, K.J (2014). *The top ten basic counselling skills*. www.people.vcu.edu/~krhall/resources/cnslskills.pdf
- Egan, G. (1986). *The skilled helper* (2nd ed) Monterey C.A. Brooks/Cole
- Hardy, L., Jones, G. & Gould D. (1996) *Understanding Psychological Preparation for Sports: Theory and Practice of Elite Performer*. New York: John Wiley.
- Jackson, S & Csikszentmihalyi, M (1999) *Flow in Sports: Human Kinetics, 1999 - Education Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California* ISBN-13:9780880118767
- Karageorghis, C & Terry, P. (2011) *The inside sport psychology* www.humankinetics.com/products/all.../the-inside-sport-psychology/
- Katz, J. & Hemmings, B (2010) *Counselling skills handbook for the sport psychologist*. British Psychological Society. www.amazon.com ISBN 13:978-1854-334992
- Khan, M. (1997 2nd ed) *Between therapist and client: the new relation*. New York W.H. Freeman and Co
- Mark, B (October, 2013) *Sports Psychology – How our sports stars are motivated*.
- Okopi, F.O. (2004) *Counselling in sport in Nigeria: Problems and prospects for counselling psychologists. Conference proceeding for the 28th Annual Conference of Counselling of the Association of Nigeria*. 52-65
- Okopi, F.O. (May 2012). *Establishing, promoting and maintaining counselling relationship for effective working alliance at a distance*. *Prime Research on Education* ISSN: 2251-1253. Volume 2, Issue 4, pp. 218-225 © Prime Journal
- Pottratz, S. (2013) *Humanistic Psychology in sport*. <http://www.thesportinmind.com/articles/humanistic-psychology-in-sport/>
- Rogers, C.R (1942) *Counselling and psychotherapy*. Boston, M.A. Houghton Mifflin
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). *Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions*. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25, 54-67. DOI:10.1006/ceps.1999.1020
- Strupp, H.R. (1986) *psychotherapy: research, practice and public policy*. In *American Psychologist*, 4:120-130
- Vallerand, R.J. (2004) *Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in sport*. *Encyclopedia of Applied Psychology* (2). 427-435 Elsevier Inc www.thesportinmind.com/articles/how-our-sports-stars-are-motivated/