


Sports Mental Edge

Fall 2018 Newsletter

*Wishing you and yours
a very happy heart-felt
holiday season.*

Alex

Thoughts:



Your sport
does not care
about your
feelings. How
you own and
cope with your
feelings will
make all the
difference



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ANGER IN COMPETITION: LEARNING HOW TO MANAGE IT

Athletes, coaches, and parents display of anger is becoming a repeated scene in sports. From youth leagues to professional athletes, the pressure to win at all cost or the fear of losing makes individuals to become emotionally reactive as shown by unacceptably displaying anger, yelling, and even aggressive behavior. What is more concerning is the explicit permission and justification for displaying such a reaction. Given that anger leads to under-performance, what can we learn to manage those emotions?

Let's understand the aggressive mind-set

There is a difference between feeling angry and aggressiveness. The emotion of anger may be triggered by not fulfilling meaningful goals. Athlete feel very disappointed at themselves or feel the burden of letting other people down, such as parents, coaches, or teammates. Anger, like any other emotion, is acceptable. How anger is demonstrated is a different story. When anger is out of control, it leads to aggressive behavior. Anger-in, such as cursing or kicking the turf, just like anger-out, shoving or punching, are displays of uncontrollable anger that lead to loss of concentration and underperformance.

A person's negative mood state often triggers aggressiveness. He perceives the environment as hostile and overreacts to minimal, even unintentional, behavior. This behavior, called "hostility mindset," is displayed when a player, who is unintentionally fouled, reacts in anger and punches another player.

The environment in which the athlete grows up is often the precursor for such a learned behavior. A coach, who yells at an umpire, loses his temper with players, and throws objects onto the field becomes the athlete's role model for how to manage anger. These coaches justify their unacceptable display of anger as just venting. They feel better once they are done screaming for letting their emotions out. What they do not know is that such a coping skill not only becomes a trait, but most importantly, an unfortunately teaching moment for young athletes who



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look up to coaches.

Although some claim that anger enhances focus and performance, it causes the opposite effect. It becomes a mental distraction. It takes time for an athlete to regain full focus. For example, a frustrated tennis player is unable to regain focus and loses the next few points leading him/her to feeling worse for letting the match go when he/she could have contended had he/she managed his/her emotions.

Some coaches believe that feeling frustrated elevates focus. Even if this scenario might be true, then would sustain anger be the winning recipe for achieving peak performance? Clearly, no winning team has ever accomplished success by being angry. Eventually, it becomes a mental distraction.

Signs of anger that must be paid attention

An athlete who carries a lot of stress continually focuses on must-win games, feels edgy, and repeatedly verbalizes angry thoughts to self or others. These signs must be paid attention to as the pent-up mind-set can easily lead to over-reacting for apparently no good reason. Many athletes become so impatient or overly sensitive to casual comments that it becomes very difficult to interact with them. Also, the use of drugs, alcohol, or pain medication may exacerbate their ability to cope with stress, hence becoming more likely to overreact, especially if the athlete perceives the other person as having mal-intended behaviors. In this case, immediate rage culminates in aggressive behavior.



**I will be speaking at the
4th Annual Social Work in Sports Symposium
in Orlando on November 5-7.**

Somatic Psychology: Bringing Felt-Sense Awareness to Peak Performance



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Teaching behaviors

The best way to address anger is by taking a pro-active stance where athletes, coaches, and parents are made aware they are having difficulty managing stressful situations. Rather than brushing all emotions as one, different situations lead to different emotions. “Feeling impatient,” “frustrated that my teammates are not understanding me,” “I want to have more playing minutes,” “my parents put a lot of pressure on me,” etc. are some of the thoughts that trigger upsetting emotions. The higher their level of awareness of the triggers that lead to impatience or anger, the more likely they will be willing to use a strategy that promotes calming their frustration.

Also, athletes are more willing to live by the rules when:

- They have a hand in formulating them
- When determining consequences for rules violations
- Focus on the team policy that was broken without degrading athletes to feel “in the dog house”
- Use positive reinforcement to strengthen team participation



The use of breathing relaxation has shown to ease tension. Bringing awareness to a slow, deep, and full in and out breathing takes the mind away from the racing thoughts. It helps to calm the arousal in the nervous system and reduces the respiratory rates.

When addressing anger in a team setting, bouncing ideas about triggers and strategies that help bring arousal down helps teammates to incorporate new ideas. Often time, players who lose their temper tend to think that they are the only ones with an anger issue when there may be other players who feel equally angry but channel their emotions in a more productive manner.

Self-awareness is the most important tool to own. It provides information which can be used to better manage your emotional responses.



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