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FEELING AND RHYTHM

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Feeling and Rhythm

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by

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Feeling and Rhythm

The principal aim of Sport Psychology is to assist athletes to learn, practice and use techniques which are designed to increase the chances of success. It seems reasonable to think that teachers of Physical Education could have a similar aim, to help their students to perform successfully in the gymnasium, in the dance room, on the playing field, on the track and in the swimming pool.

The purpose of this paper is to offer some ideas of how teachers can teach to their students techniques which successful athletes use. The function of these techniques is 1. to help the athlete or student control all factors which can possibly influence the performance of a movement, 2. to cope with those which cannot be controlled and 3. to then concentrate on the performance and let the results flow as a natural consequence of their actions. A supplementary aim for teachers would be to assist the learners to become self-learners and to be confident in their ability to perform movements within their own limitations while always seeking to extend their level of achievement.

This paper could be seen as a discussion document. A starting point. A stimulus for the sharing of ideas. Maybe all of this is known already. In that case it can serve merely to reinforce sound practice.

1. Prior Experience and Knowledge

All learners bring to a new movement problem a wealth of knowledge and experience. Although many people believe that each skill has peculiarities and is, by definition, different from all other skills in another more human and experiential sense there is no such thing as something new under the sun.

All students will have thrown an object before you try to teach them to throw a softball; they will similarly have hit, jumped etc. The uniqueness of any particular skill may be the way each of its component parts, critical elements, subroutines, are joined together. This is not the purpose of this paper and we will leave people who are far wiser and smarter than me to discuss and debate these and associated issues.

My point is that we do not have students coming with a clear slate. There are etchings of varying shades, hues and deepness, which they use to evaluate the information we offer during our instruction.

2. Thought patterns

Many years ago I was involved in preparing and writing a thesis. I had been influenced by many people in my university years but two stand out: Prof Phillip Smithells, in New Zealand, who was a student of E A Roper one of the earliest pioneers in Physical Education in Britain. Prof Smithells had a balanced, holistic view of mankind and the place of Physical Education movement, sport, recreation and dance in the scheme of the schools and community at large; and Prof. Lawrence Locke, in the United States, who cleverly combined scholarship with practical applications in the real life setting of the classroom.

My thesis was an exploratory study looking at what learners thought about while they were practising closed motor skills. Many of the assumptions underlying comments in textbooks lead me to the conclusion that the writers were seeing learners as having a clean slate and that their thought patterns during practice were not considered. The more time I spend working with students and athletes the more important and relevant their thought patterns seem to be.

Perhaps we will never know the scientific reasons, but in a very real sense we are what we think. Our thoughts are the beginning of the 'self-fulfilling-prophecy'. We become what we think we can or should be. Our thoughts control our life.

Do teachers help students develop thought patterns which will assist them in their learning? Are thoughts a conscious part of a learner's routine each time they practice or use a skill in a game? It is obvious that I believe they should be.

3. Left/Right Brain

Human beings are not simple machines. It is not possible to describe any person in simple terms. However, one concept even with all its flaws, is a convenient way of describing the basic functioning of the human brain. The left and right sides of the brain seem to have different but inter-related purposes and functions. The left side is thought to be concerned with reasoning, with logic and decision making; while the right side works in the mode of feeling, intuition and aesthetics.

When competing top athletes, successful athletes, function predominantly in the right side mode. There is not sufficient time for them to read all the available stimuli, to scan all the options, to make a decision about which action to make and then do it. There is not the time, so they must trust their body and do it.

4. Goal Setting

Goals provide signposts and measures of our progress. Again, successful athletes plan and work towards goals. These goals are short, medium and long term and they are adjusted in light of experience and progress made. Many times the long term goals are re-defined higher as the athlete exceeds previous expectations.

This could be an effective system in the gymnasium. We remember behavioural objectives. When the goals are set by the student with reasonable input from the teacher this should lead to more progress and success.

5. Keeping Records

Keeping records or diaries is a means of monitoring progress in relation to planned goals. The case of a person training for a marathon comes to mind. How can they know if they will make the distance on the day if they do not continuously monitor their condition and times each day they are training? In the classroom a teacher's response to a learner could be: 'Last week you managed to perform at this level, what would be a reasonable expectation to aim for by the end of the month?'. Or 'If you wish to perform in this activity to that level then you will need to be able to do the following skills to the following level first.'

6. Relaxation and Imagery

Relaxation is at one end of the movement/exercise continuum. It is a dynamic concept which changes with the needs and expectations of the individual. In the activity sense dynamic relaxation is being able to use only the muscles, and even down to the number of motor units, required to accomplish a particular task. We can recall the neophyte learner who is all thumbs and drops the ball or stumbles and compare them with the coordinated athlete.

The use of imagery is enhanced by relaxation techniques. Functioning in the right brain mode is helped in the same manner. Would the quality of learning in the gymnasium be improved if we were to teach our students to use techniques of relaxation and then how to use them in conjunction with imagery, goal setting and physical practice? I am sure it would.

Group Exercise: Imagine you are standing on the tennis court. Perform all the following successfully: Feel the surface of the court through your shoes, see the netting around the court, see the clouds and blue sky, see the trees, see the net, feel the racket in your hand, swing the racket and

hit the ball. How vivid were your images? How much detail did you experience?

My work with elite athletes leads me to believe that they have highly tuned powers of imagery. They not only can see, hear, taste, feel and smell but they can also manipulate the images to suit a specific purpose and use this technique to complement the other parts of their training schedule. Game analysis, correction of errors in execution and correction of errors in tactics are three specific uses of imagery in respect to technical performance.

I believe we could help students develop their imagery skills and to use them when practising and playing so that they are an integral part of the person's repertoire of games-related skills.

7. Expectation of Success

Another factor in the self-fulfilling-prophecy is the expectations we have for ourselves. We do get what we expect. Most often we expect what we think we deserve, too. We perform at the level we expect of ourselves. So as teachers we would help our students if we could assist them to learn to be realistic in their expectations but also expect success. This is related to the goals set for a particular practice session and for the season.

8. Focus on Performance

Success in golf is built on each individual shot; a cricket match is an string of individual balls bowled at batsmen; a soccer match is an amalgam of kicks, passes, traps, headers, catches, throws; running is a series of consecutive steps as we catch ourselves from falling flat on our face. All of these, and all other sporting events occur one skill at a time.

Readings in Sport Psychology point to successful athletes being able to focus their attention on performing the movement necessary for the next part of the contest. The next pass, throw, roll or catch. When they move their focus of to the result, the 'I need to be successful with this kick to win the game!' reaction, they tend to become anxious and often, as a result, fail.

As teachers we need to encourage students to separate the performance from the result. It is possible to design practices where the learners do not see where the implement finishes. This stage should not be dwelt on for too long, but just long enough for the learner to understand the performance/result relationship. If they concentrate their attention on

the result there is often insufficient energy available for the performance. Concentration on the result is also a negative experience. Questions are raised - What if I miss? Am I doing this right? I failed last time. When the performer concentrates on the execution of the movement the result will automatically occur. The result is just that, a result. A result of what took place beforehand. It is logical in terms of time and athletes understand the concept but often need to learn specific skills to control their focus of attention.

9. Feeling the Performance

Now to the main point of this paper - feeling the performance. When we perform using the right brain, mode, and have systematic thought patterns, and expect success, and are relaxed and use imagery at the appropriate time, then we can enhance all of this further by finely tuning our kinaesthetic awareness for the performance. We can say to our body, 'Okay let's go!' and a successful performance occurs.

In practice we can learn to link together a successful performance with its particular feeling. When we learn can to recall the feeling of success before we perform. It is an effective means of dissociating ourselves from an unsuccessful performance even during competition.

This is a technique which moves the locus of control into ourselves. Our strength, energy, is flowing outwards from within to the equipment and then the equipment does its task. We are in control. We are performing predominantly under right brain mode.

Let me demonstrate this with serving badminton birds.

DEMONSTRATION

To me feeling the performance encapsulates all of what I have said so far.

10. Forgetting Failures

If we wish to continue on our successful pathway we cannot entertain negative thoughts. So when we make a mistake we must learn from it, take that information, the corrections, to the next performance, and then literally throw away the failure never to be remembered again. We cannot stay glued to that mistake or when we return to similar conditions in practice or a competition the mistake will reappear. Allied to this is the important concept that we must practice as we want to play because in the competition as the pressure increases we are likely to regress to performing in the way the body knows best. If this has been

low level in practice that will be level for the competition. Remember two dictums which apply to learning: Correct Practice makes Perfect and Sufficient Successful Practice.

11. Timing of Performance

Now to an hypothesis which I have developed and spent a little time collecting information on. The actual time it takes for person to execute a specific movement is important when the quality of the movement is considered. It appears that, particularly in reasonably closed skills, the range of time relatively small. If the execution of the movement is too quick or too slow then the quality is poor. In golf the difference could be as little as a few hundredths of a second.

If we teach athletes to monitor their performance as described above and in addition develop a feel for the time it takes to execute a specific movement then we could have another technique to assist athletes to be successful under the pressure of competition. For example, a basketballer is faced with playing a free shot which under practice conditions is very simple. They could probably score 9 or 10 of 10 attempts.

In competition many factors mitigate against that success rate. Under practice conditions the athlete with instruction and successful practice can recall the feelings of the successful free throw and its tempo and rhythm. The practice conditions are altered to more accurately represent competition. Practice continues. Success rates are monitored. Then when the season starts the athlete is able to recall all of the feelings each time they are called to the free throw line. The feelings experienced at practice are brought to the competitive arena.

This is an effective technique for the athlete to gain positive control over their physical and psychological reactions to the stress of competition. Again, the locus of control is within the person and as a consequence levels of anxiety and fear are also controlled.

12. Being Nice to Yourself

A final exhortation. We owe it to ourselves!

Have a good day.

Lewis McGill

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