

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAINING PROGRAM FOR PROFESSIONAL ATHLETES

A. SANDOVICI¹ D.-I. ALEXE¹

Abstract: *The field of sports psychology has dealt, among others, with the explanation of inter-individual differences in regards to top performances in various sports. Among the variables taken into consideration, one can highlight the athletes' individual characteristics, the social context in which their professional activity takes place, the variables related to the training (technical, tactical, physical, and psychological), the contextual factors (government policies about the financing of professional sports, economical power of the professional clubs or competition opportunities). This paper is focused on the role played by psychological training in relation to the dynamics of individual top performances that the athletes can achieve. The research subjects were 76 professional athletes, divided into groups of maximum 8, who were included in a training program of 21 sessions of 50-60 minutes each. The general conclusion was that psychological training can activate important psychological resources that are convergent with each athlete's specific psychomotor skills.*

Key words: *top athletic performance, training, psychological training, athlete.*

1. Introduction

Professional literature in the field of sports psychology [10] emphasizes the idea that the factors contributing to the improvement of athletic performances do not include only material aspects (money, logistics), or aspects related to the physical training of athletes, but also variables related to the *activation of psychological resources* (which some athletes have in a latent state, according to [5] and [4], and which they have to learn to put in the service of elite performances), to the biological and

psycho-emotional *state of health* (the good somatic and physiological fitness, the low number of injuries, the overcoming of specific physical and emotional exhaustion symptoms, the ability to manage the other sides of personal and/or family life, the feeling of coherence of one's own life and trust in the future, etc.), to the *dynamics of the processes taking place within sports groups and teams* (the processes that are specific to the growth and/or maintaining cohesion, communication, and leadership), but also to the *dynamics of*

¹ "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău.

counterproductive behavior for getting top performances (the low level of adherence to the individual and group tasks, the negativity and/or indifference, the consumption of substances with a negative effect on one's fitness and on other factors related to top athletic performance, the aggressiveness towards teammates and/or coaches, other deviant or even criminal behavior, etc.).

Taking into account these variables contributing to the determination and/or facilitation of productive behavior regarding the adaptation to specific elite athletic activity and the course towards notable performances, it results that the stimulation of professional athletes would represent a key component of intervention in professional sports. However, this stimulation of athletes to obtain top performances is obviously conditioned by their *needs*. One need, generally recognized, is the stimulation of athletes in order for them to know their own resources better [8], to set an expectation level for a more consistent performance, and to approach their tasks more responsibly.

Knowing their own potential should direct better the athletes to perform according to their set goals, by increasing their self-confidence, their own strength, by learning strategies of maintaining a positive self-image, and by developing several effective strategies for managing the competition stress. This approach should be a condition for many athletes, especially in their early part of their career [7].

A second need regards the modification of the mentality and attitude of professional sports experts (from athletes and coaches to managers and financiers), who sometimes tend to neglect the

psychological component of the professional athletes' training [5].

1.1. Purpose

The endeavor envisaged the creation of a psychological training program that would develop, in 76 professional athletes of the Politehnica Iasi Club, the skills involved in the awareness and activation of their own psycho-emotional resources to fight performance and competition anxiety. The creation of this program was imposed by the fact that, although the athletes were involved in a rigorous physical training program, which also developed their technical skills involved in the professional practice of a certain sport, at the moment of this intervention the club was not collaborating with any psychology specialist who would conduct a systematic psychological training centered on the variables that are important for achieving elite performances.

1.2. The Problems

The problem that has stimulated the design and development of this program was an obvious deficit of the performances that the 18-30 year-old athletes have recorded during regional, national, or international competitions.

The discussion the authors of this paper have had with the representatives of the aforementioned club has emphasized multiple causes for the unsatisfactory state of things, which reflected in both the perception of the athletes and of the managerial staff.

Among these causes are: *the athletes' poor motivation to train adequately and to participate in important sports*

competitions (some of them being stimulated to enroll in the graduate and undergraduate programs of the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports, and others being under certain contractual clauses), *a relative fluctuation of athletes in various groups, which in some cases was related to the premature "loss" of an athlete with potential* (the main cause for this phenomenon being the athletes' demotivation due to low payment compared to their rigorous work and maturity of their aspirations), *deficiencies in regards to the selection of the athletes employed by the club, to the knowledge of their characteristics and potential, to the creation of coherent strategies of keeping in the club the already employed athletes with potential, especially the ones in whose training there were investments.*

2. Methods

The creation of the psychological training program was inspired by a model proposed by the renowned self-esteem development expert, Nathaniel Branden (2008), envisaging the systematic intervention for the activation of the ego resources involved in the growth of personal effectiveness (self image, accepting one's own ego, trusting oneself, self respect). Formulated in terms of skills, the general objectives of the program, which directed also the design of the content of the sessions with the subjects, were:

- the training and practice of the professional athletes' ability to be aware of their own cognitive and emotional resources that they would later use effectively in managing stressful situations (anxiety toward the weak performances and sports confrontations);

- the activation of their self-respect and self-acceptance during situations of confrontation with specific sports difficulties;

- the formation of their ability to identify viable solutions to problems and to adopt rational decisions, as well as their ability to engage in responsible behavior;

- the formation and development among the target group athletes of the ability to maintain and/or increase their self-confidence;

- the formation and strengthening their ability to plan the initiatives and activities that are specific to their professional life, based on clearly formulated purposes, realistic from the standpoint of personal resources and time, and adapted to the current needs for self-development that the athletes can identify;

- the formation and strengthening of their ability to anticipate and control the recurrent dysfunctional cognition, especially the one associated with the participation in athletic competitions, dysfunctional cognition that is signaled by coaches and technicians;

- the integration of the abilities referred above into a synergistic whole that would act in the personality of professional athletes, making work together the self-respect and self-acceptance, self-trust, making decisions and actions that are responsible for themselves and others (both professionally and personally).

3. Research Design

Initially, for the implementation of the psychological training program, the authors of this study used 11 groups of 8 professional athletes each, included

randomly in the groups. The inclusion of the athletes in the psychological training program was done on the basis of an informed consent that the athletes gave with the questionnaires that they filled in the first stage (the psychodiagnosis of the athletes' personality).

In each group there was a heterogeneity in regards to the sports (individual sports - chess and judo, and team sports - basketball, handball and rugby). Of the 88 professional athletes, only 81 have filled out the assessment charts for the individual characteristics after the last work session (they were filled out at home, being returned over the course of a week). Seven athletes were not included in the later tests either because they had participated sporadically in less than a quarter of the sessions, or because they had left the club before the study had ended. Of the 81 athletes who have completed the post-test, only 76 were available to fill out the questionnaires during the follow-up stage. Thus, the final quantitative results (to explore the impact that the psychological training program has had) were calculated for a group of 76 athletes.

The psychological training program was conducted over 21 sessions, in one of the rooms of the Politehnica Iasi Club. The first session had an organizational aspect, while the last included only the discussion of the significance that was explained to the subjects through their homework that they had to do for the previous week, and getting their feedback in regards to the program they had participated in.

The rest of the sessions envisaged the actual intervention and had the following content: a) the creation of a psycho-affective and interpersonal atmosphere that is favorable to the development of

activities (in this sense, relaxing background music was used); b) the communication of the objectives and activities that would be the focus of the sessions; c) the discussion of the significance resulted from the homework done by the subjects; the discussion of the difficulties encountered in the homework; d) the Jacobson progressive relaxation, finalized with the subjects' mental control of an anticipative dysfunctional cognition (the STOP technique); e) the subjects receive the materials necessary to do their homework for the following week. Each week there was a parallel work with the 11 groups, with the exception of weekends. The duration of a session was between 50 and 60 minutes, out of which 20 minutes were allocated to the creation of the psycho-affective atmosphere, to the communication of the objectives and discussions regarding the homework, and the rest to the Jacobson technique and to the control of the anticipative cognitions.

The content of the subjects' homework was inspired by the *sentence completion technique* proposed by Nathaniel Branden (2008), which is aimed at increasing self esteem and generally at increasing one's ego resources. Branden [2] conceptualizes the ego as a central variable of one's personality that is well organized and harmonious in a person capable of superior performances in her personal, professional and socio-cultural life. The technique is inspired by psychoanalysis and starts from the premise that one knows more than one is aware, one has more wisdom than one uses normally, and a greater potential than one normally shows in one's behavior. Also, the authors of this study believe that the technique capitalizes on certain cognitive-behavioral elements, because it starts from the

premise that the change of the dysfunctional thoughts about oneself can contribute to the learning of new behaviors, more adaptive, which in turn can facilitate superior performances. The metamorphosis of one's personality through the sentence completion program implies multiple sides of personal functioning, as follows: self awareness, self acceptance, responsible behavior towards self and others, self confidence, initiatives and actions conducted under clear purposes, and the synergy of the previous fields [2].

The subjects had to do a total number of 20 homeworks, their materials being distributed during each session (for the homework that had to be done for the following week). During the first session, the subjects received the instructions that stated that throughout the program, they would have to fill out incomplete sentences each work day morning. For each of the four or five incomplete sentences (different from one week to another), the subjects had to write at least five variants without worrying that their answers might be right or wrong, true or false. At the end of each week, the subjects had to read again what they had written throughout the week and to think about their answers, noting at the same time their thoughts and feelings. The

content of the incomplete sentences was organized around the six domains of personal functioning, described by Branden (2008) within the technique he proposed. At the beginning of each session, the subjects discussed with the psychologist about their homework, and at the end, they received the material for the next week.

This study was focused on the following dimensions: *observational* (the quantitative data were gathered through the questionnaires filled out directly by the participants in the psychological training program), *repeated assessments* (before and after the intervention program), *interventionist* (through the psychological training program, which envisaged the restructuring of certain dimension of the ego, the modification of the locus of control, of the orientation in approaching stressful situations, the activation of one's resources involved in the control of automated cognitions regarding the anticipative anxiety of confrontation and competition, and the improvement of the functions involved in the psycho-motor reactions) [1], [7], [9].

The content of the 21 sessions was designed to reach the aimed objectives, but every session also started with specific objectives (Table 1).

Table 1

Specific objectives of the psychological training program

Session no.	<i>Specific objectives</i>
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • informing the athletes in regards to the objectives and content of the sessions, the techniques used, the homeworks, the working schedule, the advantages and disadvantages of their participation in a high number of sessions, and the expected results; • creating an atmosphere of mutual trust between the psychologist and the subjects
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the athletes identifying the importance that the reflection on their own actions and taking responsibility for them in relation to the adaptation to the demands that are specific to their profession;

Session no.	<i>Specific objectives</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifying the personal resources that are still not activated that they would use to adapt to their current tasks • performing successfully the Jacobson analytical relaxation and the STOP technique for the control of the anticipative cognitions that are specific to the confrontation and competition anxiety
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the athletes identifying the importance that the self-respect and self-acceptance have in relation to the psycho-emotional balance and to the successful adaptation to the demands in their professional and the personal life. • identifying the personal resources that are still not activated that they would use to adapt to the external demands • performing successfully the Jacobson analytical relaxation and the STOP technique
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the athletes becoming aware of the role played by the acceptance of their own body and the respect toward its possibilities and limitations (solving the intra-psychological conflicts centered on this) in the psycho-emotional balance and in managing the necessary resources for the elite athletic performance • performing successfully the Jacobson analytical relaxation and the STOP technique
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifying and reflecting on the importance that the acceptance of their own feelings and thoughts and their analysis have in relation to reaching their goals in their professional and personal life • performing successfully the Jacobson analytical relaxation and the STOP technique
6 and 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the athletes becoming aware of the themes around which their own negative emotions and moment impulses are centered • forming the ability to identify and monitor the negative emotions and impulses when they are manifested • developing the ability to effectively manage the negative emotions and to control the impulses, so that they would not interfere with the athletes' focus on their professional tasks and with their athletic goals • performing successfully the Jacobson analytical relaxation and the STOP technique
8 and 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifying the resources in relation to the adaptation to the specific sports demands, which results from the acceptance and control of positive emotions • performing successfully the Jacobson analytical relaxation and the STOP technique for the control of the anticipative cognitions that are specific to the confrontation and competition anxiety
10, 11 and 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifying the significances that a responsible personal conduct has in relation to health and the state of well-being, as well as to success in reaching goals in one's professional and personal life • identifying the risks in relation to one's adaptation to the development tasks that involve a low level of responsibility in the personal decisions and actions • performing successfully the Jacobson analytical relaxation and the STOP technique
13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifying the significances that self confidence has, as well as the role played by this dimension of individual functioning in relation to the psycho-emotional and social balance and reaching the goals in one's professional life • clarifying their personal need to be aware of their own past experiences when self confidence has played an important role • performing successfully the Jacobson analytical relaxation and the STOP technique

Session no.	<i>Specific objectives</i>
14 and 15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the subjects discover and enrich the significances that they give to the notion of purpose in activities and life, and the role played by the setting of clear and realistic goals in the training for sports competitions and getting notable performances • structuring and clarifying the relations between purposes, activities and performance • performing successfully the Jacobson analytical relaxation and the STOP technique
16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifying and understanding the significances that the integration of ego resources, of one's responsibility in regards to personal actions and interactions, of the clarity and realism of purposes and expectations in a synergistic whole, for a successful adaptation to one's tasks in one's professional and personal life • understanding and describing the functional relations between the fields mentioned above, and between them and one's professional performance • performing successfully the Jacobson analytical relaxation and the STOP technique
17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • completing the significances regarding the synergy between the ego resources, one's responsibility in regards to decisions and actions, the clarity and realism of purposes and expectations, performing professional activities • the athletes identifying and becoming aware of their personal and interpersonal values that direct their conduct • performing successfully the Jacobson analytical relaxation and the STOP technique
18 and 19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifying, describing and understanding the various states of the ego (from the perspective of the transactional analysis) that can be facilitators or inhibitors in relation to one's efforts to reach one's professional and personal goals • the subjects identifying and becoming aware of the resources that the various states of the ego can offer for their adaptation to the tasks of the personal and professional development • forming the ability to capitalize on these resources • performing successfully the Jacobson analytical relaxation and the STOP technique
20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifying and understanding the dynamics of the relations between the instances and dimensions of how the ego functions, the learning process and the performances that can be obtained in one's personal and professional life • the subjects identifying and becoming aware of the resources that the various states of the ego can offer for their adaptation to the tasks of the personal and professional development • forming the ability to capitalize on these resources • performing successfully the Jacobson analytical relaxation and the STOP technique
21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifying the importance of their own responsibility in sports activity; • getting the subjects' feedback in regards to: a) the significations for one's personal and professional life that were revealed through the psychological training program; b) the quality of the tasks, of the psychologist implementing the program, and of the relationship between the psychologist and the beneficiary; c) the continuity of the knowledge acquired during the psychological training program in relation to the subjects' career development plans as professional athletes • getting the subjects' feedback in regards to the usefulness of the homework that they had to do weekly, and to the significations for their personal and professional development emphasized through these tasks. • Filling out the four questionnaires for the assessment of psychological traits in the athletes participating in the training program.

The psychological training program that was implemented among the athletes, with an estimated impact (through quantitative and qualitative indicators) was conceived as a group intervention that would meet the quality standards suggested by the professional literature (content of tasks, ways to accomplish them, characteristics of the interaction between psychologist and beneficiary, what the beneficiaries take from the program). Because the prime objective of the program consisted in providing the athletes with a series of psychological resources thought as key elements in the development of their career, in the designing and conduct of the meetings, a series of quality standards were met, following the framework proposed by [3]:

- *the well founded theoretical and empirical basis* (the authors of this research have studied the professional literature, which led to valuable suggestions in regards to the role played by the athletes' representations of their own ego and their motivation in getting the top athletic performances, the interaction between this and stress in sports activity, the importance, strategies and techniques used in the psychological training of professional athletes; on the other hand, the Jacobson progressive relaxation technique and the control of the dysfunctional anticipatory cognitions represent two of the objectives of the psychological intervention that are frequently the focus of sports psychology);

- *well structured practical tasks* (the Jacobson technique, the technique of controlling the anticipatory anxiety, and the homework contained very clear instructions, well articulated stages and tasks, so that they would be attractive for the participants, not wasting their time,

and giving them a real benefit, by making them identify and become aware of their own resources);

- *the exploration of certain competition fields that were relevant for the professional activity that is specific to professional sports* (both through their tasks with active participation during the sessions, and through their homework, the subjects were able to identify new sides of their potential, to redefine their strengths, to overcome their obstacles, in short to acquire a part of the sources - self knowledge, control and action - that are necessary to any professional athlete to reach their objectives and get satisfaction in their career);

- *the systematic and individualized feedback* (the homework was discussed in each session, the subjects being given the possibility to identify and understand, with the psychologist, new aspects of their personality that can be put to use for the improvement of their professional activity; the feedback was bidirectional, in the sense that the subjects were able to express their own opinion in regards to the quality and benefits of the formative activities that they participated in);

- *the emotional and social support given by group activities*. Even if a part of the subjects knew each other well from before (the subjects practicing team sports and working together for some time), the groups included also athletes from other teams or athletes practicing individual sports, giving them all the opportunity to make new relationships. This activity, together with the interactions that followed in the next weeks, stimulated the supportive social relationships, an aspect reflected also in the answers given by the subjects to the

feedback questionnaire, at the end of the program.

4. Discussions

Although the presentation of the results recorded during the psychological training program is not the aim of this paper, these authors must present the following aspects, highlighted by the analysis of the feedback given by the beneficiaries of the program:

- a tendency in the athletes to evaluate at a moderate level their personal effectiveness in doing their homework;
- a part of the subjects thought that their homeworks allowed them to become more aware of new aspects of their personality;
- many subjects indicated that they felt more comfortable with their own personality at the end of the psychological training;
- three quarters of the athletes have indicated that the psychological training has helped them discover new personal resources;
- although almost every athlete became aware of new aspects and resources of their personality, the frequency of activation of these resources to accomplish their personal and professional tasks was different for each of them;
- over a quarter of the subjects stated that the psychological training program has revealed new goals that they can follow in their professional activity, such as: to participate in more important competitions, to identify other opportunities for personal development, to change their lifestyle or to develop their

professional and interpersonal relationships;

- most of the subjects indicated a satisfaction towards the psychological training program, taken as a whole;
- the aspects that most of the subjects have declared themselves satisfied of included: the themes approached during the sessions, the homeworks, the content of the activities, the relationships with the other members of the group, the professional performance of the trainer.

5. Conclusions

Psychological training in professional sports represents, together with the tactical and physical training, a key centripetal dimension that supports and energizes the athletes during the training situations, and especially during the confrontation / competition situations. The results recorded during the psychological training applied to the target group (results that will be the subject of a future paper) support and strengthen the idea that psychological training can activate important psychological resources, convergent with the psychomotor skills that are specific to each sport.

References

1. Bandura, A.: *Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change*. In: *Psychological Review*, (1977), 84 (2), 191-215.
2. Branden, N.: *Cei șase stâlpi ai încrederii în sine* (transl.). (*The Six*

- Pillars of Self-Esteem*). Bucureşti. Editura Amsta, 2008.
3. Brown, S. D., Ryan Krane, N. E.: *Four (or five) sessions and a cloud of dust: Old assumptions and new observations about career counseling*. In: *Handbook of Counseling Psychology*, S. D. Brown & R. W. Lent (Eds.), (pp. 740-766). Third Edition. New York: Wiley, 2000.
 4. Epuran, M., Holdevici, I., Toniţa, F.: *Psihologia sportului de performanţă. Teorie şi practică (Psychology of Professional Sports. Theory and Practice)*. Bucureşti. Editura Fest, 2008.
 5. Gill, D.: *Psychological Dynamics of Sport and Exercise*. Champaign, IL. Human Kinetics, 2000.
 6. Holdevici, I.: *Psihologia succesului. Autosugestie şi relaxare. (Psychology of success. Self suggestion and relaxation)*. Bucureşti. Editura Universitară, 2011.
 7. Holdevici, I.: *Psihoterapia tulburărilor anxioase. (Psychotherapy of anxious behavior)* Bucureşti. Editura Ceres, 2000.
 7. Lazarus, R. S.: *Stress and Emotion: A New Synthesis*. New York: Springer Publishing Company, Inc., 1999.
 8. Minulescu, M.: *Teorie şi practică în psihodiagnoză. Fundamente în măsurarea psihologică. Testarea intelectului (Theory and practice in psychodiagnosis. Foundations in the psychological measurement. Testing the intellect)*. Bucureşti. Editura Fundaţiei România de Măine, 2003.
 9. Rotter, J.: *Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement*. In: *Psychological Monographs*, (1966), 80 (1), 1-28.
 10. Weinberg, R. S., Gould, D.: *Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology*. Fourth Edition. Campaign, IL. Human Kinetics, 2007.