

Psychological Preparation of the English Table Tennis Squads; A Specific Application of Psychological Techniques

Ian W. Maynard and Tim Holder

West Sussex Institute of Higher Education, College Lane, Chichester, West Sussex PO19 4PE, England

Abstract

The aim of this paper was to describe current practice in the psychological preparation of the English Table Tennis Associations National Squads. Psychological techniques and strategies used to enhance the performance of the individual players, the coaches and of the teams were highlighted. The process begins with assessment and profiling, from which individual mental skills programmes are developed. Relaxation, Imagery, Concentration, Performance Planning and Professional Attitude Development were designated as 'core skills' and became central to most programmes. The third stage of the programme involved a wide variety of techniques to reinforce the core skills or enhance communication and understanding between player and coach, or perhaps improve cohesion within the National Squads.

Key words: table tennis, applied, psychology.

Purpose

The English Table Tennis Associations' Sport Science Support Programme was established in October 1987 and is based at West Sussex Institute of Higher Education. The initial aim of the project was to offer Sport Psychology support to the players and coaches of the National Squads. In the last year this has expanded to include physiological monitoring as well as advice on nutrition and training regimens.

This presentation will focus on the psychological techniques and strategies used to enhance the performance of the individual players, the coaches and of the teams.

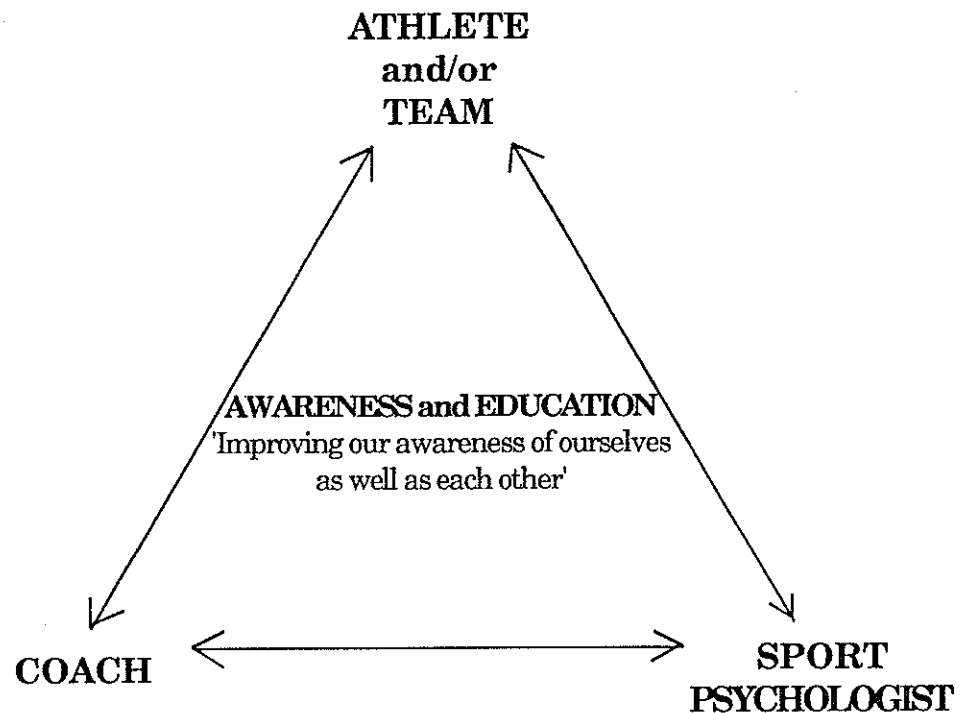
Work begins with assessment and profiling. An exchange of information takes place between player, coach and sport psychologist in order that a programme can be established for each individual. The programme is operated on the basis that it can be altered to suit the individuals requirements at that particular time, but within a general framework.

The methods of assessment and profiling used are interviews, questionnaires, observation and most importantly one on one consultancy sessions where a rapport with the individual is developed.

The level of input for the players can range from three to twenty sessions per year depending upon availability and requirements. However, a consistent level of input is always a priority in order to deliver an effective service.

Although each programme is unique to each individual, certain mental skills invariably appear within most regimens, these were designated as 'core skills' and are tailored to meet the needs of each individual.

Figure 1; Model for Psychological Assessment.



'The Triangle of Equal Expertise'

(communication and hence learning is always a two way process)

Methods:

OBSERVATION - Coach/Athlete/Team behavior and communication in training as well as competition.

INTERVIEWS - Psychologist/Athlete, Psychologist/Coach, Psychologist/Parents or Spouses (as appropriate), Team meetings (The individual athlete and 'his' or 'her' support staff or the playing team.)

QUESTIONNAIRES - Personality and Behavior Assessment. e.g. **TAIS, CSAI - 2** (Time to Event Paradigm), Pre-competition/Competition Behavior etc.

LOGS and DIARIES - Self report (Objective analysis, Thoughts, Feelings, Emotions and the Performance.)

COACHES REPORTS - Strengths and Weaknesses - Areas of concern.

INFORMAL MEETINGS - 'Seeing the other side'

The 'core skills' have been implemented as table tennis specific skills when possible. Sport specific somatic relaxation used in the table tennis situation is based upon Applied Relaxation (Ost, 1988). A critical component of this for the table tennis players has been the Differential Relaxation stage which has been delivered as a shadowplay procedure.

To help decrease cognitive anxiety and hence increase self confidence, various forms of cognitive restructuring have been used. For instance positive affirmations or countering statements have been used by many players to help cope with the effect of negative thoughts before or during performance. Countering involves players being taught to become more aware of their thoughts. When negative thoughts are recognised they are replaced and countered with a positive thought.

Imagery is utilised for practicing technique, tactics and most importantly as a confidence building tool. The psychologist aims to help the player develop multi-modal images which are readily controlled. Problems have occurred because some players have found difficulty with certain sensory modes or with the control of their imagery. Difficulties such as these have been dealt with by developing a programme based on an individual's strengths. For the player who had problems controlling their imagery (in this case he had difficulty finishing rallies), it was decided not to proceed further with the technique. Best performance imagery has been found to be very productive for enhancing self confidence. In this situation the player will imagine themselves playing to the best of their ability but in a realistic fashion.

Concentration training has largely centred on the use of refocussing techniques. If players feel they have strayed to an inappropriate attentional style in the performance situation, they are initially encouraged to recognise that fact and then secondly bring themselves back to the appropriate cue by way of a trigger.

Triggering actions, such as wiping the palm of the playing hand on the table near to the net, touching the bat on the centre line of the table, looking at the trade name on the blade handle or the rubbers have all been used in this way. In each case the action has, as far as possible, been an extension of the players natural performance habits.

Trigger words have also been used as a means of refocussing attention. Such words are used to encourage players to express a process orientation as opposed to an outcome orientation in the game situation. Many players have had problems staying in the 'present', they either tend to worry about bad points just played or future important points. This inappropriate focus has obviously tended to detract from their performance. To cope with this type of difficulty players identify words that they feel are appropriate and important to the 'process' of playing table tennis. By attending to the meaning of the trigger word the player can refocus on the important cues in the 'here and now'.

In an attempt to avoid or lessen the effect of many of the game related problems players experience, much time has been devoted to developing player specific integrated warm-ups. The aim is to produce a consistent routine that players can follow in their build up to a game. By including physical, technical and psychological components players have found they can more consistently produce the correct physical and psychological state prior to the game which is then more easily sustained during the performance.

The third stage of the programme involves a wide variety of techniques to reinforce the core skills. These are individual specific strategies which may be used to enhance communication and understanding between player and coach, or perhaps improve cohesion within the National Squads.

Based on the Leadership Scale for Sports questionnaire devised by Chelladurai and Saleh (1978), coaching and leadership styles were assessed. The coaches were asked to assess how they currently perceived themselves and secondly how they would like to coach in an ideal situation. The players were also asked to assess their coach on current leadership styles and secondly on how they would like to be coached in an ideal situation. If a coaches perception differed between the current and the ideal situation a meeting was held with the psychologist to determine strategies that may be beneficial.

Likewise if a difference between the players and coaches perceptions were found, again meetings were used to highlight any problem areas and devise suitable strategies to improve the situation.

Communication between coaches and players in a one to one situation was highlighted with the introduction of player profiling. Each player made a personal assessment of the technical, tactical and physical aspects of their game. The coach also assessed the player on the same attributes. In a feedback session mediated by the psychologist any differences in perception between the coach and player were discussed. This procedure also establishes a knowledge base from which the players short term goals are identified. This strategy has allowed a more personalised approach to be adopted by the coaches.

Various techniques and strategies have been initiated to enhance the cohesive aspects of the National Squads. For instance a form of simulation training based on rationalising potential catastrophe situations has been effective in group situations involving players, players and coaches, and in the development of junior coaches. In each case a process of rationalisation is encouraged until a satisfactory consensus is reached. Other topics addressed in group situations include travel skills and team skills. Future topics for consideration include Model Player, Model Team and Model Coach exercises. In such group situations ground rules are established which encourage open-minded, open-ended discussion.

Many of the players involved on an individual basis in the mental skills training programme have achieved much as a result of the work. In a similar way to physical training it is clearly those who have adhered to the mental skills programme most carefully, and practiced the skills regularly, who have achieved the greatest improvements in the control over their psychological state, both before and during the game.

The national coaches have sighted Sport Science support as a major factor in the recent successes of English Table Tennis. It is hoped that in the future this type of support can be focussed on the junior and cadet national squads.

References

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