

Attitudes towards Psychology among Top Table Tennis Players in Nigeria

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Abstract

Most of the early work describing psychological methods of motivating sportsmen, and so helping to optimize their performance in active ambience has been done in Europe and Asia.

Since, by its very definition, psychology is culture-specific, it is to be expected that knowledge gained in such situations cannot be applied with total success in another environment unless adequate cognizance is taken of the beliefs, attitudes and mental sets prevalent in that environment.

A questionnaire survey, backed by individual interviews, was carried out on a group of top table tennis players in Nigeria, while they were in camp preparing for a major competition (the 41st World Championships in Chiba, 1991).

The main areas of exploration were their basic beliefs and world views -- including each individual's religious background, the family milieu from which they derived and their educational history. Each person's knowledge, and his attitudes towards psychological methods were explored, with specific reference to the game of table tennis.

The findings revealed that most of the players were superstitious, though the strength of their superstitious beliefs tended to vary from person to person. A significant percentage disparaged the possible benefits of formal psychology in enhancing their performance. Many believed, instead, that the best motivators for optimal performance in competition were the promise of financial gain (in the form of monetary reward customarily handed out by the government of the day to athletes who excel in the service of the nation). The promise of foreign travel constituted the next most powerful motivator. Few felt that 'internal' motivation, using any recognized psychological techniques was particularly useful in preparing them for major competitions.

Introduction

It seems to be generally accepted in sporting circles nowadays that a proper 'scientific' approach to optimizing the skills and performance of sportsmen must include the use of certain psychological training methods. Examples of techniques that players are supposed to master include such skills as relaxation, imagery and concentration. The appropriate use of such knowledge, for many of the advanced table tennis playing nations of the world, more and more involves the on-site presence of a team of psychologists working in tandem with the coaches and the players at all the different stages of their preparation.

It is easy to hypothesize that the poorer nations whose athletes do not have access to such expert help would automatically be at a disadvantage. However, even in cases

where some amount of relevant expertise is available, it may not be appropriate, or useful, to simply seek to reproduce the observations of other worker using the self-same techniques, without taking adequate cognizance of the socio-cultural milieu, including the prevalent belief-systems -- not only among the generality of the people, but also in the educational and class subculture that the athletes belong to.

Methods

Twenty top table tennis players, made up of ten males and ten females, were given questionnaires to fill during a national camping exercise which took place in Ilorin, a city in the Kwara State of Nigeria. The questionnaire consisted of 24 items, which included questions on a broad range of personal and attitudinal details. The questionnaires were filled in the presence of the interviewer, in a one-to-one session. The interviewer then asked other personal questions based on the responses to the items. Mostly these were attempts to make the individuals explain further on certain points which they had responded to ambiguously or inadequately, or to give any further details as required.

Results

The mean age of the population under study was 23 years.

The average level of educational attainment was the West African School Certificate (equivalent to the GCE 'O'Level).

Five out of the players (25%) believed that there was such a thing as 'Juju', and that this could be called into play in some form either to enhance a player's game, or to deter his opponent. One other player pronounce herself unsure about whether the supernatural could influence table tennis or not. All the others denied that it had any effect. None of the players admitted using 'Juju' themselves.

To the question on whether they were acquainted with any psychological principles or techniques which could have some effect on their game, 8(40%) of the players said 'Yes'. 7(35%) were of the opinion that such knowledge was not relevant to their game. 5(25%) were not sure whether 'psychology' was useful or not, and they did not consciously apply it themselves. Regarding the manner they felt they could best be motivated towards optimal performance, 6(30%) reported that the promise of large sums of money was the best motivator they could imagine. 9(45%) wanted good training facilities and adequate provision of relevant equipment. The promise of foreign travel supplied the greatest inspiration to one(5%) of the players. One(5%) wanted a combination of financial reward and foreign travel. One more player would not volunteer an opinion on the matter. Only for 2(10%) were the prime motivations purely 'internal' (i.e. their own drive to succeed and excel).

Discussion

For a person who has a thorough understanding of the culture of Nigeria, the responses above constitute no real surprise. But to the average individual from another part of the world, reading through such responses or actually interviewing the subjects may represent something of a culture shock -- especially if such a person is operating from the liberal political standpoint that insists that 'every human being is the same'.

On being confronted with such facts, an individual charged with the task of psychologically improving the performance of the team may react with panic and despair, throwing up his hands and announcing the sheer impossibility of the task. Such a reaction in fact, attended the first attempt to introduce psychologists to a team sport (football) many

years ago in our country. The specialists, armed with the conventional wisdom of their

trade, found it virtually impossible to establish any deep-going rapport with their subjects. They were heard to complain bitterly at professional meetings about the illiteracy and sheer 'inaccessibility' of the players, most of whom could not even communicate fluently in the lingua franca -- English.

And yet if these psychologists had taken pains to study their target population before embarking on their venture, everything that occurred to them would have been easily predictable.

Nigeria is a nation in rapid transition from a hodge podge of mini nationalities into a modern state. It is also carrying out a difficult structural adjustment programme which has created severe economic difficulties for large segments of the population, but has also led to the acquisition of huge wealth by some people. As a result of these factors, there is now a rampant materialism in all aspects of life, and people expect financial reward for everything they do, since the worth of an individual is measured by how much money he has, and how flashy a car he rides. Athletes who represent the nation in competitive events expect to receive financial reward for their efforts. This financial reward, as the study shows, is for many their primary reason for participating in the sport in the first place.

Also important in the interpretation of the results is the fact that the average player has a relatively low level of formal education. Like many people of low education in the Nigerian society, they are very oriented toward physical, practical things and are not given to reflection and 'psychologizing'.

These realities present a unique challenge to the psychologist who wants to assist the Nigerian team. It is a challenge which will only produce results if it is met in an imaginative way. Some of the key points to note in tackling the situation are as follows:

1) At all times, the psychologist must be able to convey a warm empathy and acceptance of the players and their beliefs so as to be able to get sufficiently close to them to make a meaningful contribution. The worst thing that could happen would be for him to dismiss their deeply held beliefs out of hand. This would immediately set up an insurmountable barrier between them.

They may say the right things when he questions them, if they perceive that it is necessary to do this in order to get by (e.g. disavowing any belief in the supernatural or claiming great enthusiasm for psychology), but behind his back they would merely laugh and carry on as before.

2) The coaches must not be left out in this process of 'educating from within'. Often they are ex-players themselves who grew up in the same environment and who has very similar beliefs to those of their players, even if they would not freely admit to this. An attitude of uncritical acceptance would facilitate openness and make it possible over time to devise a workable programme.

3) The issue of financial reward as a major motivating factor is a rather difficult point to tackle as it is tied in with the general materialism of the society and the relatively low level of income of the average player -- especially the ones who are not playing professionally in Europe. It would certainly help if there are a large number of local competitions with reasonable prize money. This would help to improve the standard of living of the top players and make them less dependent on government handouts, while at the same time striving for excellence.