Psychological Skills Training Manual for a Youth Baseball Team

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PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS TRAINING MANUAL
FOR A YOUTH BASEBALL TEAM

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Master’s Project
Submitted to the School of Human Movement, Sport, and Leisure Studies
Bowling Green State University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION
In
Kinesiology

December 4, 2015

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Introduction

Yogi Berra once said, “Baseball is ninety percent mental; the other half is physical.” Though Berra’s usual goal was to amuse people with his wit, this is a good example of the fact that even fifty years ago, athletes and scholars alike recognized the importance of psychological factors in sport. More recently, an increase of psychological skills training (PST) has been seen for Olympic, professional, and collegiate athletes, as well as its implementation into the American military. It is important to assert that PST is not a formula for a quick fix or a “magic pill,” but it is a cumulative effort to enhance the cognitions of an athlete in a long-term fashion. Frey, Laguna, and Ravizza (2003) observe, “Just as physical skills require time, patience, and practice, mental skills require these demands as well” (p.122). Athletes need to be committed to a PST program to receive its benefits just like they would with strength and conditioning programs. In some populations, it may help to gain this commitment by first recognizing the use of PST in elite levels of sport or by referencing successful high-profile athletes advocating for the use of PST. It may also be appropriate to rationalize techniques and exercises through theory and evidence-based findings in research. Gaining dedication to a PST program is essential for lasting and meaningful improvement in athletes’ cognition and performance while participating in sport.

Research has shown the benefits of PST programs in improving the cognitive processes of athletes, which in turn can improve their performance and enhance its consistency (e.g., Blakeslee & Goff, 2007; Frey et al., 2003; Thellwell, Greenlees, & Weston, 2006). A PST program can help athletes to set more effective goals, manage
stress more efficiently, build self-confidence, and improve concentration (Horn, 2008; Weinberg & Gould, 2011). A PST program generally undergoes a three-stage process, although these stages may not necessarily be formally defined to the athletes (Weinberg & Williams, 2010). First, there is an education stage in which the consultant explains the relevance of a concept to athletic performance, perhaps even referencing theory and literature if deemed appropriate for the athletes. Second, the acquisition stage of a program involves teaching strategies and techniques that the athletes can include into their own athletic strategies. Lastly, the practice stage implements the learned strategies and techniques into the practice setting—and ultimately, the competition setting.

Like in any physical workout program, goals should be set in a PST program. A defined outcome to the program with an appropriated timeline sets a tone based in reality for PST and can help to enhance athletes’ commitment, or “buy-in,” to techniques included in the program plan (Weinberg & Williams, 2010). This timeline will help to ensure athletes’ dedication, as certain points of the timeline will serve as checkpoints to provide feedback on their progress and increase accountability. In these designated checkpoints, the consultant may be flexible and responsive to the athletes’ progress and can make adjustments accordingly. The timeline can also bring a sense of autonomy to athletes. An accurate and time-specific framework can provide the athletes with guidance in the absence of the consultant, and completion of these tasks even without the consultant’s presence may help to motivate athletes (Cox, 2002).
In many instances, the time component of a PST program is determined by the nature of the sport (e.g., time between practice seasons, length of season, time between competitions, etc.). The coaching staff also may need to set a timeline based on athlete—or consultant—availability. This obstacle may occur instances of collegiate or youth sport where athletes are not always in close proximity with each other or with the consultant. It also may be fitting to use periodization in a PST program by addressing specific aspects of PST to be implemented at predetermined intervals. For instance, periodization may mean assessing strengths/weaknesses and teaching basic skills during the preseason, followed by refining skills and applying them to specific situations throughout the season, and application of anxiety/stress management skills prior to significant competitions (von Guenther, Hammermeister, Burton, & Keller, 2010).

Learning psychological skills is no different than educational or motor skill learning; regular, consistent, and conscious effort is required in order to fully learn skills and perform them effectively. Thus, athletes should be encouraged to dedicate a certain amount of practice time to PST or at least work to incorporate effective psychological techniques into their practice routines. It is important that the consultant has a deep knowledge base in sport psychology literature. Additionally, the consultant’s techniques and interventions must have a theoretical foundation in order to educate athletes as to why or how these techniques can enhance performance (Weinberg & Gould, 2011).
Theoretical Foundation of PST; Achievement Goal Theory

This PST program is rooted in the motivational climate of a sport environment and subsequent goal orientation of the athletes within it. Achievement goal theory (AGT) provides a foundation for many human actions and interactions. Its perspective has been applied to mainstream psychology, educational psychology, and most recently to a sport psychology context. The central principle of AGT is that every individual is goal-oriented and has a desire to demonstrate his or her competence (Vesković & Milanović, 2011). As humans, we constantly are appraising our own abilities to perform tasks or achieve goals. Nicholls (1984) states, “In achievement situations, each individual’s purpose is to demonstrate high ability and avoid demonstrating low ability” (p. 332). First, people will evaluate the estimated difficulty of performing a task. Then, they gauge their ability to demonstrate competence in that task. Finally, this subjective appraisal of ability will lead people to take actions that pursue demonstration of that ability, as well as make decisions that avoid exposing their inability to perform a task. This process happens very quickly and often without much conscious attention. However, this process affects people’s behavior and their psychological wellbeing; it takes place within sport, as well as outside of it.

Athletes typically evaluate a task based on their goal orientation. Nicholls (1984) explains, “When individuals are task involved, they see more effort as leading to more mastery and higher ability...when individuals are ego involved, their chances of demonstrating ability depend on the ability of others” (p. 332-333). The athlete’s subjective appraisal of his ability and perceived difficulty are key components in how
he performs in a task while participating in sport. Cervelló, Rosa, and Iglesias (2007) explain the different approaches that athletes may employ in sport. In some situations, an athlete may base their definition of achievement on the relative abilities of others and thus, success is equal to demonstrating a greater ability than others. This status-based idea of success is referred to as ego orientation. On the other hand, an athlete may evaluate success by considering personal improvement, effort, and mastery as dimensions of their achievement. If this is the case, the individuals have adopted a task orientation and have a self-referenced approach to achievement. Task-oriented individuals will typically focus on making progress, self-improvement, and skill mastery. Conversely, ego-oriented individuals are directed towards competing and social comparison to determine their level of success.

A task orientation has been associated with enjoyment, positive experiences, and positive affect to a larger degree than has an ego orientation (Bortoli, Bertollo, Comani, & Robazza, 2011; Duda & Ntoumanis, 2005; Vesković & Milanović, 2011). One would presume that if adopting a task orientation promotes positive emotional results, an individual is far more likely to pursue additional participation in sport. Young athletes can receive both the short- and long-term benefits of a task orientation through enhanced affect and subsequent continuation of involvement.

The premise of AGT may appear basic as a process, but it also incorporates many interactions and moving parts, which can muddy the waters on arguments of these orientations existing in opposition to one another. Seemingly, a more fluid, dynamic relationship exists between ego and task orientations in people. Certainly, the dispositions and the uniqueness of people's circumstances shape a tendency to
adopt one orientation more often than the other. However, Ames (1992) notes that beyond this, we also must consider the social environment of people and the resultant success criteria of their environment at any moment.

A key component of AGT, in its relationship to youth sport, lies in the affective outcomes and psychological states that occur as a result of a task-oriented climate. The primary goals of youth sport include but aren't limited to enjoyment, skill development and continued participation. As such, these goals rely heavily on the environment in which young individuals are immersed in and their interactions with their coaches, peers, and parents.

Another element of youth sport, skill development, is a long and sometimes frustrating process. Development involves making mistakes, but maintaining a task-oriented environment has been shown to enhance positive affect, and "in the face of difficulty or failure, these athletes are more likely to persist and demonstrate desirable achievement strategies" (Lochbaum & Roberts, 1993, p. 168). This persistence is a key for early skill development, especially for novices in a sport and those who are learning new skills as their abilities increase. In addition, a task orientation and focus on mastery are shown to be associated with increased effort, leading to increased performance in tasks where athletes have low actual competence in a task (Bortoli et al., 2011).

**Youth Baseball Today and the Risk of Lost Values**

An athlete may adopt a more pronounced ego- or task-orientation based on their experiences within both practice and competition environments. In light of this,
the motivational climates of evolving youth sport programs are at risk of the aforementioned goals and athletes' values being compromised by the “need” to win at all costs. Our nation’s youth baseball programs function much differently than they did 20 years ago. With every new season comes an increase in “pay-to-play” travel teams. These regionally-based organizations typically have several chronologically structured travel teams (e.g., 15-under, 13-under, 11-under, etc.) that compete within the region during the week and head to distant locations on weekends. For instance, an Ohio-based organization may travel to Michigan, Kentucky, and Tennessee in a one-month period of the season with even farther, week-long trips scheduled after the school-year ends.

One can readily understand that the travel, facility usage, and equipment during these seasons aren’t free, so parents are expected to either raise funds or pay out of pocket to afford these opportunities. As such, with financial sacrifices come expectations of success. The danger of these expectations is the kind of definition that parents, players, and coaches assign to “success.” The coach-initiated learning climate and situational cues contribute as much to performance and personal improvement as the social cues within sport (Bortoli et al., 2011; Cervelló et al., 2007). If success comes in the form of trophies, bragging rights, and notches on proverbial belts, one can expect an incredibly ego-oriented motivational climate.

A task-oriented climate is ideal in a youth sport context, so perhaps the most effective environment would be one that allows competition as a means of improvement (i.e., group drill contests and relays in a practice environment to invoke directive and task-focused competition). Ultimately, the coach or consultant may use
some components of both orientations, but a task orientation should be the primary focus. In this, the coach or consultant helps to facilitate an environment in which young athletes can maintain healthy levels of competition while maintaining a strong, consistent focus on promoting skill development.

Coaches, consultants, and parents should also assume a responsibility to encourage morality in sport. With the “need” to win, deviance and antisocial attitudes have the potential to propagate in sport. In spite of this, research has shown that a task orientation contributes to a more prosocial environment, as athletes’ orientation can directly affect their values and behavior, especially in youth sport (Lee, Whitehead, Ntoumanis, & Hatzigeorgiadis, 2008, p. 607). Many components of a young individual’s value system develop away from the field of play, but there will always be opportunities for “life lessons” in sport. Kavussanu (2006) describes the role that achievement orientation can play in sportsmanship and morality in sport:

Strengthening task orientation and mastery climate may enhance prosocial action but will not necessarily eliminate antisocial conduct unless one is exposed to a mastery climate for an extended period of time. At the same time, coaches should focus on tempering ego orientation and performance climate if they want to promote sportsmanship. (p. 586)

Although Kavassanu’s (2006) study focused on adolescent soccer players, acts of aggression, “dirty play,” and antisocial behavior run rampant in much of youth sport. Even though high-profile athletes may gain media attention for aggressive and deviant behavior, the responsibility of teaching healthy competition and sportspersonship to young athletes falls on the shoulders of coaches and parents. The
following chapters highlight psychological skills that can be taught in a youth baseball setting (13-17 year old athletes). This manual is by no means all-inclusive, but it covers several topics in PST that can be applied to lay fundamental groundwork for cognitive and performance enhancement, as well as the promotion of a climate that encourages fun, learning, and sporting behaviors.
Goal Setting

Imagine taking a vacation to a place you’ve never been before, or even taking a trip to an unknown location. You have no map, no sense of direction, and come to think of it, you don’t even know where you currently are. How realistic would it be to have a successful vacation under these conditions? Would you even know what success would look like at this point? Just like planning a trip, setting goals gives athletes an idea of where they want to go. Some of the most successful people in the world are goal-setters. Their goals have driven them to focus on what tasks are most vital to their success, mobilize their efforts to pursue those tasks, and give them resiliency in persisting toward task completion. Goal setting is crucial to lasting success in sport—not to mention other areas of life. The goal setting process forces athletes to evaluate where their abilities lie in order to decide where they can improve, and it provides them with a “roadmap” to where they want to go from there.

Types of Goals

Within the sport psychology literature, there are three main types of goals that have been identified: outcome goals, performance goals, and process goals (Kingston & Hardy, 1997). Outcome goals are exactly what they sound like, with a focus on the outcome of an event. In baseball, some examples of outcome goals would be winning games, having a certain batting average, or achieving a particular earned run average. These kinds of goals can be observed simply by looking at team statistics. However, it can get frustrating for athletes—and even parents or coaches—to focus on these
goals, as many of them are not in the athletes’ control. It is common to see batters hitting line drives directly to outfielders and pitchers making good pitches that result in base hits. Let us not forget pitches that are on the edge of the strike-zone, in which everyone is at the mercy of the umpire’s discretion. There are simply too many unknown variables that can come into play for outcome goals to be an effective focus for athletes, although much of the value and pressure of sport lie in precisely those outcomes.

Performance goals signify an end result of athletes’ individual actions, and these goals can be achieved relatively independent of other people or variables. An example would be reaching base safely as a hitter by showing discipline to balls and putting quality swings to strikes. Another would be improving a specific pitch in one’s repertoire. Setting and focusing on completing performance goals will help to give athletes the best chance of reaching outcome goals. However, even if these outcome goals are not achieved while completing of performance goals, athletes can still take stock in the success of meeting objectives that were within their control.

Process goals focus on the specific behaviors that athletes have to demonstrate throughout performance to perform successfully. Pitchers may focus on keeping their elbows up when throwing for consistency, or outfielders may remind themselves to run on the balls of their feet to give them consistent and steady sight-lines to a fly ball. Focusing on these behaviors and paying attention to the details of the skill will aid in effectively performing the tasks necessary for success in the sport. So, if athletes set and complete process goals, they will in turn give themselves the best opportunity to complete their performance goals, which will put them in an ideal position to reach
outcome goals. Athletes must navigate a complex interweaving of process, performance, and outcome goals. All of these goals are important to consider in varying degrees during the course of a season. Athletes and coaches need to be able to clearly distinguish between the types of goals they are setting in order to effectively do so.

**Achievement Orientation and Goal Setting**

Athletes’ achievement orientations directly affect the kinds of goals they prefer to set and pursue. Ego-oriented athletes may focus their goals on competitive aspects of sport, like winning championships or scoring runs. Unfortunately, since these outcome goals are not completely within their control, they may experience greater anxiety, especially in failure to achieve these goals (Duda & Nicholls, 1992). On the other hand, task-oriented athletes set goals rooted in skill mastery and improvement during the course of a season. Early in the season, it is typical for coaches to set goals with a task-oriented mindset; however, it is important for coaches to maintain this perspective through the season and stay consistent with it (Roberts & Kristiansen, 2010). This consistency is especially important when working with young athletes whose lack of experience may lead them to lose focus on task-oriented goals if their coaches do. Coaches who emphasize skill mastery and effort in their goals will convey values to their athletes such as effort and self-referenced attainment.
Setting SMART Goals

For effective goal setting, coaches and athletes should work in collaboration with one another to employ the SMART acronym of goal setting (Doran, 1981). SMART goals are those that are specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic, and timely (Rubin, 2001). Effective goals are specific so that athletes can narrow their focus to improve or develop something tangible. Setting general goals like “do my best” or “help my team win” are not giving athletes enough direction to pursue a specific plan for success. In this generality, athletes may overlook that if they want to help the team, they must first focus on helping themselves to find success. This is not to prioritize an individual over the team but to drive a more specific area of focus that athletes can attend to and, more importantly, be able to control. A goal setting plan emphasizes making improvements to these specific aspects of athletes’ performance in order to make changes toward increased performance.

Effective goals must be measureable. In reference to the introductory analogy, how would someone know they’ve reached their destination unless they have chosen it ahead of time? Goals that are measureable and observable are effective for several reasons. First, athletes who set goals that can be measured are likely to be more motivated to pursue those goals, as a sense of accountability and athletes’ commitment both contribute to motivation (Weinberg, 2010). Second, measurable goals make it easy to track progress and evaluate whether or not a goal has been completed. To coincide with the observable aspect of effective goals, athletes can set effective goals by making them action-oriented. It is one thing to want improvement or to think about improvement, but it is another to have a plan of what to do to
improve performance. Like the first two aspects of SMART goal setting, goals that are action-oriented will aid athletes in both motivation and accountability.

Although goal setting is an effective way to look toward performance enhancement, athletes must be cautious not to over-reach past their capabilities and set their sights higher than they are able to achieve. An ambitious goal may seem motivating initially. However, athletes may become overwhelmed by the magnitude of a lofty goal or frustrated in failure to reach it if they do not have several short-term, reachable goals that will ultimately lead them to the ambitious goal. A brainstorming session may produce some of these lofty goals, which is perfectly appropriate. When athletes are ready to establish their final goals at the end of the session, it is important that these goals are pared down to realistic, attainable objectives that do not set the athletes up for failure. Lastly, effective goals are considered to be timely or driven by time. Goal setting is a dynamic and ongoing process, so there may not be a clear start and end point beyond season limits. These deadlines or timetables can provide athletes with a structure to align their goals with, and it is important to acknowledge these deadlines or checkpoints with purpose. If goals have been unmet at certain points in time, the evaluative aspect of goal setting can very useful. Athletes may utilize these checkpoints to readjust their goals and reflect on what may have led to goals being unreached. These deadlines allow for progress to be considered, and they open up the possibility to adjust goals accordingly.
Practical Application for Goal Setting

Goal setting can be an effective strategy to enhance athletic performance. It can be implemented rather easily, and following these guidelines for effective goal setting can lead to more positive results. Setting goals can lead to more focused attention, increased motivation, reduced anxiety, and increased confidence.

Warm-Up Activity

Give each of your players a piece of paper and a pen/pencil. Allow them one minute to write down as many of their individual goals for the season as they are able. When this minute is over, have the players choose three (3) of their goals that are most important to them. Explain that you will use SMART guidelines to make their goals effective, and that each letter in the word “SMART” stands for a characteristic of effective goals.

Specific – Be clear about what you want to happen.
- Not specific: “I want to get better at fielding.”
- Specific: “I want to improve my footwork every time I play or practice in the field.”

Measureable – Decide how you will be able to track progress toward your goal.
- Not measureable: “I want to be a better pitcher.”
- Measureable: “I want to throw more fastballs for strikes.”
- Be creative and give yourself ways to measure things that you might not normally. For example, you could grade every at-bat as an A, B, C, D, E, or F at-bat or rate it on a 1-10 scale.

Action-Oriented – Make your goal a behavior, something you can do that someone else could observe.
- Not action-oriented: “I will improve my fielding skills.”
- Action-oriented: “I will practice my footwork at shortstop for an extra 15 minutes every practice.”

Realistic – Set goals that are challenging but still attainable.
- Not realistic: “I want to win every game that I pitch.”
- Realistic: “I want to limit the other team to 3 runs or less every game that I pitch.”

Timely – Goals should have a timeline to follow or checkpoints to evaluate progress. If it helps, break down a long-term goal into several short-term goals.
- Not timely: “I want to throw more strikes.”
- Timely: “I want to throw 5 strikes in a row by the end of each practice session.”
Guidelines to follow for setting effective goals:

- Set goals for your performance, not for outcomes.
- Goals should be set for practice as well as competition.
- Prioritize your goals and focus only on 1-3 goals at any given time.
- Be specific with your goals.
- Set goals that you can measure.
- Your goals should be based in *doing* something.
- Challenge yourself with your goals, but stay realistic.
- Set deadlines and checkpoints for your goals.
- Don’t just think them...ink them. Write your goals down and leave your written goals in a place where you can see them.
- Share your goals with others so they can help you achieve them.

**Self-Talk**

When watching elite sport on television, we often are able to see athletes’ lips moving even when others aren’t around. Do the cameras focus more on athletes who talk to themselves, or could there be another explanation? It is a common assumption in sport psychology that these athletes are using self-talk (ST), the cognitive products of an athlete’s mind during practice or competition (Zourbanos et al., 2010). Self-talk can cause a shift in attention or focus, increase effort toward an objective, or even reshape a thought process completely within the athlete. There has been a recent growth in sport psychology literature surrounding self-talk and the navigation of an athlete’s thoughts during the course of participation in sport. This internal dialogue has been receiving increased attention as studies are finding how influential and widespread its implications can be.

**Verbal Cues**

Self-talk is not an endless narrative. In most instances, self-talk is not comprised of elaborative, complete thoughts in what we would think of as “complete sentences.” Many times, athletes use words or short phrases that are referred to as verbal cues to quickly access certain thought processes. Landin (1994) describes verbal cues as, "concise phrases, often just one or two words, that either direct a student's attention to relevant task stimuli or prompt key movement pattern elements of a motor skill" (p. 299). For example, a football coach may instruct a quarterback to keep his elbow up and follow through with his thumb turning down
when throwing the ball. The quarterback can prepare himself by using the verbal cues "elbow up" and "thumb down" to mentally prepare for executing this skill—these cues are good examples of instructional self-talk, which will be addressed later in this chapter. Cue words help to control and organize thoughts for the athlete, focus on basic execution of skills, and can motivate an athlete to exert more effort. Verbal cues should be: (a) brief and phonetically simple, (b) logically associated with important aspects of the skill, and (c) timely in relation to the task (Landin, 1994). Meeting those guidelines will help to keep an athlete’s self-talk simple and direct, which limits the potential for “information overload” through the possibility of conflicting or distracting information.

**Types of Self-Talk**

Two primary types of self-talk have been identified in the literature, and they may affect performance differently. *Instructional self-talk* refers to statements that relate to focusing attention, technical information, and tactical choices, while *motivational self-talk* refers to statements that relate to confidence building, effort, and positive moods (Zinsser, Bunker, & Williams, 2010). Instructional self-talk can enhance the execution of motor tasks involving skill, timing, and accuracy, while motivational self-talk may be more useful for increasing levels of arousal (Hardy, 2006). The way an athlete performs self-talk should be appropriate to the task at hand, considering whether it is a precision/accuracy task, a strength/endurance task, or a combination of the two (Theodorakis et al., 2001).
Instructional Self-Talk

Instructional self-talk is crucial to success with any kind of skill performed in sport, whether it is self-directed by the athlete or given by someone else. This can help to provide a more narrow external focus and attention toward the most relevant stimuli, namely from an individual's environment or their proprioception. Research has shown significant benefits of using instructional self-talk for skills across multiple sports, including shooting a basketball, badminton, throwing tasks, and putting a golf ball (Boroujeni & Shahbazi, 2011; Cumming, Nordin, Horton, & Reynolds, 2006; Harvey, 2002; Malouff & Murphy, 2006; Theodorakis, Chroni, Laparidis, Bebetsos, & Douma, 2001). It is noteworthy that in this research, using instructional self-talk yielded improvements in performance regardless of the athlete's skill level.

Motivational Self-Talk

The second type of self-talk is motivational self-talk, which is used when an athlete wishes to “psych up” or increase confidence to perform a skill. Motivational self-talk refers to statements that relate to confidence building, effort, and positive moods, which can ultimately lead to improved performance in sport (Zinsser, Bunker, & Williams, 2001). Researchers in sport psychology utilize Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory as a framework to explain motivational self-talk in how it affects athletes. In this conceptual framework, verbal persuasion through positive self-talk is predicted to increase self-efficacy, which is an athlete’s belief about their ability to complete a task. Enhanced self-efficacy may increase the athlete’s level of effort, persistence, and ultimately performance during practice or competition. Research on
motivational self-talk has showed marked improvements in not only measures of self-efficacy, but also in athletic performance in sports such as basketball, tennis, soccer, and water polo (Boroujeni & Shahbazi, 2011; Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2004; Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2008; Theodorakis et al., 2000. Theodorakis et al., 2001).

Other Effects of Self-Talk

Motivational self-talk has even been shown to positively affect athletic performance outside of the typical contexts of practice or competition. Studies have found that motivational self-talk may aid in power production and positively affect muscular force production (Tod et al., 2003). These conclusions are primarily supported by the ability of motivational self-talk to increase arousal, increase self-efficacy, and improve ability to sustain attention on the task at hand. In addition to power production, motivational self-talk has been shown to effectively improve motor task performance in physical education (Kolovelonis, Goudas, & Dermitzaki, 2011). Motivational self-talk is beneficial in speed and power tasks, due to its ability to aid in self-efficacy, self-confidence, and effort. To briefly sum up these differences, it has been shown consistently in the literature that instructional self-talk can enhance performance for precision tasks, while motivational self-talk can enhance performance in both precision and power tasks, and both types of self-talk decrease the occurrence of inferring thought (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2004). When a task requires fine motor movements, then instructional self-talk strategies are more
effective. Also, when a task requires primarily strength or endurance, then both motivational and instructional strategies are effective (Theodorakis et al., 2000).
Practical Application for Self-Talk

Self-talk is the internal dialogue that we all have at some time or another. This activity will help you to enhance your athletes’ performance in sport by taking control of their internal dialogue and using self-talk to their advantage.

Step 1: The first step that athletes can take is to become more aware of their thoughts in order to see if they are effective. Athletes may do this by keeping a thought log, where they track thoughts associated with performing skills. Athletes may also use paperclips or slips of paper to keep track of ineffective thoughts by moving the object from one pocket to another and assessing after a certain period of time.

- For example, if you are constantly telling yourself, “I can’t hit an outside pitch,” this thought would be considered ineffective because the thought predicts failure.

Step 2: Once athletes determine that they have ineffective thoughts, they must find a word, phrase, or sound that helps to interrupt and stop these thoughts.

- Some examples of interruptions may include the phrases “stop,” “don’t,” or “quit it.” Athletes have also used sounds that help them interrupt these thoughts like a scoreboard buzzer, a car horn, or a whistle.

Step 3: After developing an effective interruption to stop ineffective thoughts, athletes must find a way to replace ineffective thoughts with effective ones.

- For example, the aforementioned ineffective thought could be replaced with a more effective thought using verbal cues like “fast hands” or “head still.”
  - These cues provide useful instructional cues that can aid athletes in hitting a ball.

An easy way to remember this process is the acronym “AIR,” which stands for

1. Awareness – “I can’t hit.”
2. Interruption – “Stop,” “don’t,” or “quit it.”
3. Replacement – “head down, fast hands.”

Effective self-talk will help to shift athletes’ focus onto the present and allow them to focus on the task at hand.
Anxiety and Arousal/Activation Control

Using a common imaginary situation for young baseball players, let us pretend the bases are loaded in the bottom of the ninth inning. There are two outs and the count is full. How can some pitchers remain calm and focused on the upcoming task of making a quality pitch, while others can only think about their heart pounding and that “shaky” feeling that won’t seem to go away? The difference here is arousal control and using skills to manage anxiety during competition. While some players are able to maintain appropriate levels of arousal during competition, others may find themselves losing control of their physiological or psychological state. For the latter, hope is not lost; athletes can develop skills to bring awareness and self-regulate their arousal levels before, during, and after competition.

Anxiety

Weinberg and Gould (2011) define anxiety as “a negative emotional state in which feelings of nervousness, worry, and apprehension are associated with activation or arousal of the body” (p. 78). Anxiety is a multidimensional construct in its responses, as well as its sources. Perceived physiological responses are associated with somatic anxiety, while psychological reactions are associated with cognitive anxiety (Landers & Arent, 2010). Typical signs of somatic anxiety are a “butterflies in the stomach” feeling, heightened muscle tension, increased perspiration, or even heart palpitations in some cases. Cognitive anxiety manifests through worry, apprehension, and other negative thoughts. In some instances, cognitive anxiety may
manifest through perceiving somatic symptoms as debilitating, although athletes who are highly competent in psychological skills are better able to perceive this bodily arousal as facilitative (Abrahamsen & Pensgaard, 2012; Fletcher & Hanton, 2001; Neil, Wilson, Mellalieu, Hanton, & Taylor, 2012). For instance, the sensation of “butterflies” or an increased heart rate can be perceived as excitement, but it may also be identified as nerves or fear. Symptoms of somatic anxiety are congruent with increased bodily arousal, but their interpretation is what will positively or negatively impact athletes and their performance (Landers & Arent, 2010).

It is noteworthy that excessive levels of both cognitive and somatic anxiety can hinder performance (Behzadi, Hamzei, Nori, & Salehian, 2011; Grossbard, Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2007; Smith & Smoll, 1991; Van-Yperen & Duda, 1999). However, each type of anxiety can affect athletes differently, and their interaction paints a complex picture of how anxiety contributes to performance. Hardy (1990) theorized that performance is affected by a combination of cognitive and somatic symptoms of anxiety and arousal (See Figure 1). In this interaction, athletes who have a low level of cognitive anxiety will see performance outcomes based on their physiological arousal in an inverted-U manner. However, athletes who experience high cognitive anxiety will see a sharper decline of performance.
based on increasing physiological arousal to the point of “catastrophe,” and recovering from this sharp decline in performance will take longer than would in a low state of cognitive anxiety.

The effects of anxiety can be farther reaching than merely the performance of athletes. Williams and Scherzer (2010) argue that in athletes, increased levels of anxiety could make them more susceptible to physical injury. It is also important to consider that persistent and chronically high levels of anxiety may also lead to discontinuation of sport altogether (Van-Yperen & Duda, 1999). This leads to concerns of the pressure that many of today’s youth are exposed to early in their sport experiences and whether or not this has an effect on prematurely ending sport participation.

Sources of anxiety in athletes may be external, such as perceived parental pressure, negative peer evaluation, or a coach’s mistake penalization and teammate comparisons (O’Rourke, Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2011; Vazou, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2006). Athletes’ anxiety also may come from internal sources including low self-esteem, low confidence, and body image issues (Weinberg & Gould, 2011). External and internal sources of anxiety may act independent of one another but can also work in combination with each other and have a magnified effect on athletes in some circumstances.

**Achievement Orientation and Anxiety**

A task-oriented environment—whether or not ego-orientation is present—can in itself lower anxiety and increase enjoyment (Behzadi et al., 2011; Yin & Boyd,
In a task climate, coaches can base their team climate around skill mastery and define success as self-comparison within each of their athletes individually (e.g., past performance in relation to current performance, personal bests, tracking improvement, etc.). A task climate has a marked effect on athletes’ levels of anxiety, particularly by being associated with lower levels of cognitive anxiety and a more facilitative interpretation of somatic anxiety (Eisenbarth & Petlichkoff, 2012). It is accepted that a task oriented environment, focused on mastery and improving or developing skill, leads athletes to experience less pre-competitive anxiety and provides an atmosphere more conducive to skill improvement (Grossbard, Cumming, Standage, Smith, & Smoll, 2007; Ommundsen & Pedersen, 1999). It is clear that the coach’s creation of a task oriented culture is critical in fostering the lasting growth and development of skill for his or her youth athletes in a less stressful environment.

Arousal Control

There is a need for athletes to possess skills to reduce their arousal levels during some of the high-pressure demands of sport, both in practice and competition (Neil, Mellalieu, Wilson, & Hanton, 2007). However, there are also instances in which athletes need to increase their activation/arousal and “psych up.” (Gould & Udry, 1994). Recent research has shown that professional athletes regard relaxation skills as essential to competitive performance and spend twice as much time practicing these skills compared to collegiate athletes and three times as much when compared to recreational athletes (Kudlackova, Eccles, & Dieffenbach, 2013). Athletes implementing and practicing these skills may reap benefits after only a short duration
of practice, even within a week or two of implementation (Williams, 2010). Some arousal/activation control techniques include controlled breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, routine development, and the use of music.

**Controlled Breathing**

Williams (2010) notes that obviously humans have been breathing since birth, but many people breathe ineffectively, especially in situations of high-stress and pressure. Athletes are not immune to this response and may also succumb to inefficient breathing in demanding situations. Controlled breathing can help to give both momentary and deep relaxation for athletes. If they can learn and practice efficient breathing, this is a simple technique to lower tension and relax in instances of high-stress. Athletes can use breathing to bring their attention back inward, which will in turn help to bring more awareness to their bodies and may help detect disproportionate muscle tension. When athletes can increase their bodily awareness, they are taking steps that will allow increased control and in turn, more consistent performance.

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) was first introduced almost a century ago in order to “bring quiet to the nervous system” (Jacobson, 1925, p. 73). PMR first served as a method for clinical populations to enhance the mind-body connection and
improve individuals’ ability to recognize any residual muscle tension in the body. Its premise is essentially that conscious muscular contractions show a more significant contrast between tension and relaxation, thus improving individuals’ ability to detect and, ultimately, release tension in muscles voluntarily by mindfully attending to them. These skills are to be practiced with the same regularity and commitment as any other skill for athletes. The most effective time to teach and implement relaxation is after athletes finish with practice, weight training, or other physical activity (Williams, 2010). At post-exercise, the body has already “burned off some stress” and natural responses to lowering tension and anxiety are already taking place. This is an ideal time to further perpetuate feelings of relaxation using the aforementioned skills, as well as bringing awareness to the mind as to what “relaxation” actually feels like.

**Routine Development**

Many athletes are able to develop certain thoughts and behaviors that prepare them, both body and mind, to perform tasks at certain times in sport. Sometimes these pre-performance routines develop organically. However, when athletes find that their level of arousal/activation is not ideal for performing a skill, it may be beneficial to conscientiously develop a pre-performance routine that will aid in activation control and allow them to perform the skill more consistently. This routine should be established for all areas of sport, including the warm-up, practice, and competitive environments. Once a routine is practiced deliberately and consistently, it will help to trigger an optimal level of arousal, provoke task-related thoughts, and enhance focus for performance (Williams, Nideffer, Wilson, Sagal, & Peper, 2010).
Elite athletes who consistently perform at a high level have established clear behavioral protocols before performing skills in certain situations, so the development of these routines early in athletes’ careers can allow for the physical and psychological cues that lead to more consistent performance.

**Music**

The use of music can bring about changes in athletes’ arousal/activation levels, as well as their mood states and attentional focus (Karageorghis & Terry, 1997; Krumhansl, 2002). Music can influence physiological and psychological arousal in a bidirectional manner. Depending on the type and tempo of the music, it can help athletes to either relax or “psych up” before a competition or during a training session. Through developing bodily awareness with the aforementioned skills, athletes can observe how their bodies react to different types of music and use it as a basis for what they listen to before competing in order to facilitate the most appropriate bodily response.
Practical Application for Controlled Breathing

Breathing is something we all do, but how efficiently do your athletes breathe?

Controlled breathing is an easy, effective method to control muscle tension and anxiety. Athletes who practice controlled breathing also increase the amount of oxygen supply to their blood, which is in turn delivered to the brain and muscles. This can enhance both muscular and cognitive functioning.

Guidelines to give athletes for effective, efficient breathing:

- Inhale through your nose.
- Allow your diaphragm the space to drop by letting your belly gently swell out as you inhale.
- Imagine your lungs filling up section-by-section, from the bottom through the middle and to the top.
- Let your lungs empty from top to bottom and pull your belly in to empty any lingering air while exhaling through your mouth.

Breathing exercises:

- Rhythmic breathing*
  - Inhale as you slowly count to four.
  - Hold your breath as you slowly count to four.
  - Exhale as you slowly count to four.
  - Repeat.
- 1:2 breathing*
  - Inhale for a four count.
  - Exhale for an eight count.
    - If you run out of air before the eight count is finished, try taking a deeper breath in.
  - Focus on steady, even airflow in and out.
  - If this comes easily to you, increase your counts to 5:10 or 6:12.
- “Reset” breathing (for stressful situations and/or mistakes)**
  - Deeply inhale and exhale while “hitting the reset button” in your mind with an accompanied action to regain focus.
  - As a batter, you could “wipe the stress/mistake off of your bat” between pitches or “hit reset” while unstrapping and re-strapping your batting gloves.
  - As a pitcher, you could “clear the slate” by sweeping away dirt from the pitching rubber or step off the mound and “rub the stress” off the ball.
  - As a fielder, you could “rub the error out of your glove” or smooth over the dirt in front of you and “start fresh.”
Application:

➢ Practice taking 30-40 deep breaths during the day, even when you aren’t at practice or competing.
➢ In baseball, there are many breaks in the action. You can use these breaks as an opportunity to take a focused, effective breath. Some of these breaks could be:
  o As a batter
    ▪ In the on-deck circle, before you walk to the batter’s box.
    ▪ When receiving signs from your coach.
    ▪ In between pitches.
  o As a pitcher
    ▪ In the dugout, before going out on the field.
    ▪ As you step onto the pitching rubber, before beginning your pitching motion.
    ▪ In a stressful situation, standing off of the mound.
  o As a fielder
    ▪ Before going out on the field between innings.
    ▪ In between pitches.
    ▪ After missing a ball or a bad throw and before the next pitch is thrown.

Practical Application for Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Muscle tension isn’t always a negative thing. However, excessive, persistent, or unwanted muscle tension can lead to decreased performance when practicing and competing. To reduce muscle tension, athletes can practice progressive muscle relaxation (PMR).

Why relaxation is important:
- The ability to detect and control muscle tension is vital to consistent, optimal performance.
- Athletes must be aware of tension AND the location of that tension within their bodies in order to control it.
- Progressive relaxation helps to show the contrast between tension and relaxation for many muscles of the body so that athletes can learn to become more aware of these differing states and what they FEEL like.

Guidelines for your athletes’ PMR:
- Find a quiet place where you can sit comfortably or lie down.
- Wear comfortable clothing that isn’t tight or restrictive.
- You may dim or turn off lights if that helps you to relax better.
- Close your eyes and focus all of you attention on your body.
- Maintain deep, natural breathing for the duration of the relaxation.
- Release tension gradually and don’t force it. Relaxation will happen naturally if you let it.

Development of PMR*:
- Initial practice of progressive relaxation addresses most muscle groups in the body and may take 20-30 minutes.
- With practice, less time will be needed, and the athletes can identify and focus on specific areas of tension that he will relax.
- Ideally, athletes will work to develop their relaxation techniques to the point that they can relax on-site during a competition while omitting the tension phase of the technique altogether.

PMR Podcasts:
- There are countless PMR podcasts available through Internet searches. These can be downloaded onto most personal music players/smartphones and listened to anywhere for your convenience. Depending on the athletes’ preference, the PMR exercise may be more relaxing with or without background music.
PMR Instructions:

- On the following page is a sample script in which you can take your athletes through the progression of PMR. You may also record yourself reading the script to make PMR more accessible and flexible to the athletes’ needs.
  - Recite or record progressive relaxation scripts slowly and in a calm voice.
  - Take your time reading the script and don't rush through it. It may seem like you are reading at a very slow pace, but it won't sound as slow to someone listening to you.
  - When reading instructions, allow for enough time between instructions to allow for tension and relaxation (tension for 5 seconds and relaxation for 10 seconds) before changing muscle groups.
**PMR Script**

Allow your attention to focus only on your body. If you begin to notice your mind wandering, bring it back inward to your body and relaxing your muscles.

Take a deep breath in through your abdomen and exhale slowly...as you breathe in notice your stomach rising and your lungs filling with air...when you breathe out, imagine the tension in your body being released and leaving your body in your breath.

As we go through each step, remember to keep breathing.

We’ll begin.

Tighten the muscles in your forehead by raising your eyebrows as high as you can...now release, feeling that tension fall away...tighten your eye muscles by squinting your eyelids tightly shut...and release...now raise your cheeks toward your eyes...and relax, feeling those muscles loosen and become limp...now gently pull your head back as if to look at the ceiling and feel the tension in your neck...and release it, feeling the tension melting away...now feel the weight of your head sinking into your chest as your neck relaxes. Breathe in...and out. Let go of all that stress as you relax...now clench your fists. Feel that tension in your forearms and hands...and release that tension as you feel yourself being relaxed. Now, flex your biceps...feel that tension building in your muscles...and release it, enjoying that feeling of limpness and relaxation...now shrug and lift your shoulders up toward your ears...and relax, feeling their heaviness...tense your upper back by pulling your shoulders back trying to make your shoulder blades touch. Feel what that tension feels like...and release it. Tighten your chest by taking a deep breath in. Hold the breath and feel the tension...and exhale, releasing all of the tension. Now tighten the muscles in your stomach...feel that tension...and release it. Gently arch your lower back. Feel those muscles tighten...and relax them. Straighten your legs fully and press them together, as if you were holding a piece of string between them...feel what that tension is like...and release it, letting the tension fall out of them into the floor. Now flex your feet, pulling your toes towards the ceiling and feeling the tension in your calves...and relax. Feel the weight of your legs sinking down into your chair and the floor. Curl your toes and feel the tension in
your feet...and release that tension. Take a moment and identify tension you are still feeling in your body...release that tension and let a relaxed feeling take over. Feel the warmth and heaviness of your relaxed body sinking into the chair and the floor...3, start coming back to awareness of the present...2, bring your mind back to the room...1, open your eyes when you’re ready.

Let us return to the scenario referenced in the previous chapter of this manual: it is the bottom of the ninth inning. The bases are loaded, there are two outs, and the count is full. You are up to bat. Your body is relaxed and your mind is focused. In this high-pressure situation, how can it be possible to feel so cool, calm, and collected? One explanation may be that you have been practicing imagery, and you have “been in” this situation hundreds of time in your mind. Since you have “seen” yourself in this situation so many times, you feel prepared, which in turn makes you feel confident. If you feel confident, it is easier to feel relaxed and let the game come to you as it is meant to.

Sometimes people picture food during hunger pangs, they daydream, or they envision an upcoming conversation with a friend. These are all examples of imagery in action, and its use is commonplace both within and outside of sport. Hank Aaron, one of the greatest hitters in Major League Baseball’s history, describes his use of imagery in preparation to face the opposing pitcher in a number of situations:

“I would start visualizing myself, like I’m standing at the plate, with runners at first and second, or second and third, whichever, how he’s gonna [sic] pitch me in that given situation. Then I would start visualizing, for example, if the bases were loaded, how he would try to get me out, or go after me. Then I would look at it, for example, in the eighth inning, seventh inning, sixth inning, and I would put myself in all of these different positions and put him in the
same positions and try to figure out what is going to be best and what I am
going to be looking for. So, I visualize all these different situations.”

(Hanson, 2008, “Play Big Baseball”)

Successful athletes use imagery regularly, even if they may not be able to
describe their experiences in a similar way as Aaron did. Aaron described his
use of imagery as “visualization,” but these terms will be differentiated later in
this chapter.

**Imagery Defined**

Vealey and Greenleaf (2010) define imagery as “using one’s senses to
re-create or create an experience in the mind” (p. 268). This process can allow
athletes to prepare for upcoming competitions, practice new or acquired skills,
and relive past experiences. Theoretically, baseball players can use imagery to
take batting practice on and off all day without even setting foot on a field or
touching a bat. Pitchers can re-create successful bullpen sessions or well-
pitched games with imagery, or they could mentally rehearse their strategy for
a game on the way to the field. A cautionary note: reliving negative
experiences with imagery can have an equally powerful effect on the athlete as
can positive experiences, so coaches should emphasize deliberate re-creation
of only positive experiences (Vealey & Greenleaf, 2010). The images that
athletes produce invoke emotion, which can in turn elicit significant reactions
on the athlete’s mind and body.
Imagery is sometimes used interchangeably with the term “visualization,” although a distinction should be made between the two. To visualize experiences may employ only one of the senses used in imagery, which is most effective when it involves all relevant senses (e.g., visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, olfactory, and gustatory). Baseball players will benefit from imagery that attends to aspects like seeing the colors of the field, hearing the sound of the ball hitting a glove or a bat, smelling the leather of their gloves or the ball, and feeling the bat grip in their hands. Athletes who utilize more senses in their imagery will produce more vivid images, thus enhancing its overall effectiveness.

**Theoretical Support for Use of Imagery**

There are several theories that serve to explain how imagery benefits athletes. Lang’s (1977, 1979) Bio-informational Theory of Emotional Imagery argues that imagery of a situation invokes bodily responses similar to those experienced by an athlete within that situation. Examples of these physiological responses have been found in research exploring Lang’s theory, including elevated heart rate, heightened blood pressure, and neuromuscular activity congruent with an imagined movement (Acosta & Vila, 1990; Helfer, 1999; Yogo, Hama, Yogo, & Matsuyama, 1995). According to Lang, these emotional images have complex associations within the brain that can be categorized as based in external stimuli, internal responses, and perceived importance of the image—these associations are referred to as propositions in
Lang’s theory. Within the sport context, athletes who create or re-create images of high-pressure moments in competition may experience physiological changes due to emotional shifts that they are likely to experience as a result of those images.

Lang (1977, 1979) argued that imagery is really a representation of cognitive processes within the mind. That is, our minds use these propositions to create the perception of an experience regardless of whether we are recalling it or creating it. This cognitive aspect of Lang’s Bio-informational Theory seems to be its only limitation according to opposing views of imagery, as other researchers argue that the neurocognitive nature is more appropriate when processing sensory images (Murphy, Nordin, & Cumming, 2008). There seems to be some debate on the origins of an image, but there is no argument that imagery can increase motivation and enhance performance.

Performance Benefits of Imagery

Benefits of imagery have been shown in sport psychology literature across sports and experience levels. Structured implementation of imagery into a practice routine can enhance performance more effectively than physical practice alone (Smith, Holmes, Whitemore, Collins, & Devonport, 2001). In addition to physical repetition, imagery can help athletes to effectively learn and develop new skills within their sport (Ay, Halaweh, & Al-Taieb, 2013). Implementation of an imagery program as part of mental skills training also has been associated with enhanced attention during sport
performance (Calmels, Berthomieux, & d'Arripe-Longueville, 2004). Athletes incorporating imagery into their preparation can enhance their development of sport-specific movements. Additionally, pairing physical practice with imagery may be beneficial in allowing athletes to rehearse performing in multiple emotional states.

The use of imagery is not limited to the practice/preparation setting. There are some situations in sport that allow athletes time to engage in brief positive imagery just moments before performing a task while competing. In tennis serving, a task similar to overhand pitching, athletes who integrated positive imagery into their pre-serve routine improved their overall accuracy in a very short time frame (Malouff, McGee, Halkford, & Rooke, 2008). Imagery has been highly touted in pre-competitive environments, but research has also shown its value in being used within a competition as well.

**Imagery and Injury**

Injury is an aspect of sport that many athletes will face at some point in their careers. Athletes who suffer injuries may experience a wide range of emotional and psychological states, but most injured athletes adopt the expectation that they should be unwavering and mentally tough in the face of pain and adversity (Arvinen-Barrow, Massey, & Hemmings, 2014). The physical nature of injury may be easier to observe, but the psychological effects of an injury can be just as pervasive and difficult to overcome (Santi & Pietrantoni, 2013). Imagery can help to offset, and even prevent, some of these
negative psychological effects of injury. Injured athletes have discussed use of imagery before, after, and even during their rehabilitation; they have referenced creating images of practice and competition while undergoing physical therapy, which also worked to enhance their motivation throughout their recovery (Driediger, Hall, & Callow, 2006).

Hamson-Utley & Vazquez (2008) note that “mental imagery can be implemented with injured athletes during rehabilitation to maintain a positive outlook, control stress, improve self-confidence, manage pain, and promote healing by imagining injured ligaments or bones repairing” (p. 36). All of these potential benefits of imagery may lead to enhanced motivation, rehabilitation adherence, and a smooth transition back to sport participation for injured athletes.
Practical Application for Imagery

This activity will allow your athletes to mentally rehearse a warm-up routine for a game. Similarly to progressive relaxation, have your athletes wear loose-fitting clothing and sit/lay in a comfortable position. Then read the following script in a relaxed, even tone and pause as appropriate to allow athletes to fully experience the exercise. Don’t rush this script, as time is on your side while using imagery.

“Get in a comfortable position and focus completely on your breathing...if your mind starts to wander, that’s fine. Just notice it and bring your focus back inward and pay attention to your breath...notice how your breath comes and goes naturally and smoothly. During this exercise, take in as many details as possible.

Let your mind take you to a baseball field. It can be a field that you’re very familiar with, or it could even be one you’ve never been to. Don’t judge where your mind takes you, just accept it and take in everything around you...You are at the field for a game. Notice the source of light on the field. Is it from the sun or from lights?...See the walls or fences at the field...the dugouts...the bleachers. Notice all of the colors...Focus your attention on the people sitting in the bleachers. Do you notice any familiar faces?...Do you have friends or family there? Just notice them and know that they will be there when the game is over. It’s time to bring your focus completely to the field...Take a deep breath in through your nose. What do you smell?...Do you smell the grass? The leather of gloves or the ball? Notice any other smells that you are aware of...Listen for the sounds around you. Do you hear the sound of the ball in the mitt? Chatter among the players or coaches? Pay attention to any other sounds you notice. Maybe people are talking or yelling in the bleachers...Notice your ability to turn down the volume on them until you can hardly hear them at all. Notice how you can bring your full attention to the field.

Now, take notice of everything that happens as the warm ups come to an end. Everyone begins to come together, and the game is about to start. Your teammates go to their positions and are spread out around the field. The umpires and coaches are ready for the first pitch. Now we’ll pause the action so that you may turn your focus inward. How are you feeling right now? Do you notice any tension or feelings of unease? Remember that how you’re feeling is normal, even if you have some negative feelings...take a deep breath in, and feel yourself pushing away any negative feelings with your exhale. Breathe in confidence, and breathe out tension. Feel yourself do this for a few moments...now breathe in through your nose slowly, and let the air out smoothly and slowly. Feel how strong and relaxed you are now after taking that power breath. Notice how confident and relaxed you are, ready to focus all of your attention on the game.

Allow your breathing to continue as it was, taking in slow, deep breaths. When you feel ready, slowly begin to bring yourself away from the field and back into the room.
Let your mind bring you back into the here and now. Feel free to open your eyes whenever you're ready.”
Closing Thoughts and Considerations

This manual gives a brief guide to implement a few key aspects of psychological skills training to a youth baseball setting. An athlete that becomes well-versed in utilizing these skills may experience benefits in his performance over time, but this is not an all-inclusive manual. Every athlete is different, and some strategies will be more effective for some athletes than others. Coaches/consultants should consider the individual needs of an athlete if alternative strategies are to be researched and utilized. Instructions given for each skill have been intended to serve as general guidelines that baseball players can apply to different positions and tasks within the sport.

Obtaining “buy-in” from young athletes can sometimes be easier said than done. New and challenging skills, particularly psychological skills, may sometimes be frustrating and difficult for an athlete to commit to. If the reader encounters resistance while introducing new concepts, it may be useful to highlight specifically how each skill can help your athletes’ performance on the field. This manual will in no way make the reader an expert in psychological skills training. Ideally it will provide useful knowledge to pass on to athletes and help to enhance their performance. Your athletes need to understand that you are only asking them to do things differently in order for them to become better baseball players. As a coach, keep in mind that athletes need to know how much you care before they care about how much you know.

Lastly, the content in this manual has been selected to implement in a similar manner to any other training for athletes. As with any new skill, there may be some
difficult or frustrating parts of the psychological skills development process. Coaches, parents, and players are encouraged to continue implementing these skills even if there is little perceived progress early in the process. Developing these skills is often a deliberate process that requires as much—or more—practice as would be required of physical skills within a sport. It is recommended that athletes continue to implement strategies until they become second-nature, and even then these skills can be refined to increase effectiveness for athletes, dependent on their sport, position, and goals.
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