



Excerpt from *Sport Psychology for Coaches*

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MOTIVATION

Think of an athlete who has dominated your favorite sport, such as Annika Sorenstam, Cal Ripken Jr., Lance Armstrong, Rafael Nadal, Tiger Woods, or Mia Hamm. All are talented, to be sure, but they are also known for their incredible work ethic and drive. Without motivation, talented athletes do not reach their full potential. And athletes who are not particularly talented can achieve a great deal of success with strong desire and motivation.

Despite their best efforts, most coaches can vividly recall the frustrating experience of working with athletes who were less than optimally motivated. The exasperated coach may exclaim, “I just cannot understand why I can’t get these athletes to consistently train hard. They seem to focus their efforts on everything else but sport. I’ve tried everything but just can’t motivate them.” Most coaches have also had the pleasure of working with highly motivated athletes—they worked hard and persisted even in the face of adversity. Their commitment stemmed from their love of the game and the satisfaction they derived from working toward their goals. After working with such an athlete, the coach may comment, “I’ve never known a more persistent competitor. I wish I knew what drives her to excel; I’d package it and give it to every member of my team.”

Motivating athletes to sustain hard training, compete aggressively, and focus their energies toward specific goals is indeed a challenge. It’s one thing to develop athletes’ motivation when things are going well; it’s a whole new challenge to keep them motivated in times of adversity or during the off-season. Motivation is influenced by so many factors that it would take several volumes to consider them all in depth, but the most vital components are few and easy to understand. When we talk with coaches, they ask two questions:

- Why are some athletes so much more motivated than others?
- How do I motivate the athletes I coach?

Coaches want the secrets to motivation. There is no quick fix or simple solution. If it were that easy, you would have learned the secrets to motivation long ago. Instead, we recommend that you develop an understanding of the principles that underlie motivation. Rather than focus on simple how-to approaches, which tend to oversimplify, we focus on understanding *why* athletes are motivated. Armed with that understanding, we can then turn our attention to *how* to motivate athletes through the ups and downs of a season.

WHAT IS MOTIVATION?

How do we know that athletes are motivated? They act like it. And how does the motivated athlete act or behave? Motivation is reflected in three behaviors:

Choice. Motivation shows in the choices athletes make—choosing to play sport, to practice, to set challenging goals, and to train even in the off-season.

Effort. Motivation is also reflected in how much effort athletes give—how intensely they train, compete, and strive to achieve their goals.

Persistence. Motivation level can be seen in how long athletes persist at striving to attain their goals, even in the face of adversity and obstacles.

We can better understand what motivation is by debunking some motivation myths.

Motivation Myth 1: Athletes Are Either Motivated or Not Motivated

Some coaches believe that motivation is simply a personality trait, a static internal characteristic. They believe that an athlete either has motivation or doesn't—end of story. They don't believe motivation is something coaches can develop. For these coaches, the key to having a motivated team is to find and recruit athletes who have the right personality. If this were true, little could be done to inspire athletes who were not highly motivated. However, while some athletes are, in fact, more motivated than others, this view does not provide any direction or guidance on how coaches can help develop and sustain athletes' motivation. The fact is, coaches *can* help athletes develop motivation.



Motivation is not something coaches can simply give their athletes.

Motivation Myth 2: Coaches Give Athletes Motivation

Other coaches view motivation as something they can inject into their athletes on demand, like a flu shot, by means of inspirational pep talks or gimmicks. They may use slogans, posters, and bulletin board quotes from upcoming opponents. These strategies may be helpful, but they are only a small piece of the motivation puzzle. There is much more to the story—motivation is not something coaches can simply give their athletes.

Motivation Myth 3: Motivation Means Sticks and Carrots

Some experts suggest that effective motivation means using carrots (rewards) and sticks (punishments) to drive athletes to do things they would not do on their own. This may seem innocuous, but think about it on a deeper level. It assumes that athletes don't want to do something, so the coach will provide motivation to make them do it through punishments or rewards. Coaches who emphasize the stick, in the form of chastising, criticizing, yelling, coercing, and creating guilt, often find themselves swimming upstream. No matter what they try, they meet resistance and negative attitudes. Not only is this approach ineffective, it saps the enjoyment out of sport. There is also more to the motivation puzzle than the carrot (reward) approach. Coaches must understand athletes' needs in order to create a team culture that naturally motivates them.

ATHLETES' NEEDS AND INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Great coaches know that they don't give athletes motivation. Rather, they create the conditions or team climate in which athletes motivate themselves. Coaches do this by recognizing the importance of **intrinsic motivation**, which stems from the sheer pleasure and inner satisfaction athletes experience from participating in sport. Intrinsically motivated athletes play for the love of the game. They enjoy the process of learning and mastering difficult sport skills and play for the pride they feel when working hard toward accomplishing a challenging goal. They also find sport stimulating and feel exhilarated when engaged in it.

So what is the secret to cultivating athletes' intrinsic motivation? The answer is simple: Understand what athletes need from sport. Like anyone, athletes are motivated to meet their needs. Structuring sport in a way that meets athletes' needs fosters intrinsic motivation, and failure to meet athletes' needs lowers it. What do athletes need from sport? Evidence from a variety of sources suggests that athletes seek to fulfill four primary needs: to have fun and experience stimulation and excitement, to feel accepted and belong to a group, to exercise control and autonomy, and to feel competent.

► The Need for Fun and Stimulation

If you asked athletes why they participate in sport, what do you think they would say? In a survey of nearly 10,000 athletes, the most common reason given was to have fun (Ewing & Seefeldt 1990; Seefeldt, Ewing, & Walk 1992;). Having fun and developing skills were rated as more important than even winning. When former athletes are asked why they quit sport, they typically say something along these lines:

- "I found other activities more interesting."
- "I would rather do other things than play sport."
- "Sport was no longer fun."
- "I burnt out on sport."

Do you see the connection between the reasons athletes play sport and the reasons they drop out? Motivation comes naturally and easily when athletes are having fun. Lack of fun makes sport seem like a boring job, lowers motivation, and even causes athletes to drop out. If sport is not fun, coaches find that motivating athletes is difficult, if not impossible.

Sport is much more enjoyable when athletes find practice activities stimulating, challenging, and exciting. A youth sport coach came to see me in complete frustration because her team was not motivated. On arriving early to watch the team practice, I noticed a group of youngsters playing an intense game of basketball outside on a bent hoop without a net. It turned out that these were her players, but once inside the gym, true to the coach's word, they were totally unmotivated. The practice was intense, highly structured, and monotonous. The drills were either boring or beyond their skill level. The kids often appeared antagonistic to the



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Lack of fun makes sport seem like a boring job, lowers motivation, and even causes athletes to drop out.

coach, who constantly threatened and administered discipline. The coach had failed to realize that most of these kids wanted to play basketball for fun and to learn skills in a way that was enjoyable, not to do drills and calisthenics all day. Nor did they want to be yelled at. When the coach left at the end of practice, many of the players stayed behind and played pickup basketball. The entire atmosphere changed, everyone hustled, and there was a lot of laughter and intense play. Because the coach had deprived the players of attaining one of their major goals for joining the team—to have fun—they met their need outside of practice.

Most athletes are intrinsically motivated when they first start playing. One of your greatest challenges as a coach is to avoid destroying your athletes' intrinsic motivation to play sport. Some coaches erroneously believe that fun means easy workouts, frivolous games, and countless team parties. But challenging practices, intense workouts, and focusing on skill development can be fun. In fact, fun is maximized when athletes experience optimal stimulation and excitement. No one finds it fun to lose or fail constantly, so build in some success. Most athletes are also bored by being underchallenged while performing tedious drills. Thus coaches should strive to fit the difficulty of the skill to the ability of the athletes. Coached this way, athletes feel challenged but not overwhelmed, because they have the ability to meet the challenge.

Coaches must understand athletes' needs in order to create a team culture that naturally motivates them.

Wise coaches have long known that meeting athletes' need for fun enhances motivation. Yet they also know that athletes must practice to learn and improve skills. The creative coach can find ways to facilitate skill development in a way that is fun for athletes. Here are a few examples:

- Use developmental progressions to create an optimal skill–challenge balance.
- Keep practices stimulating by varying the activities.
- Teach fundamentals by means of action-packed, gamelike activities that use the targeted skills.
- Keep everyone active. Don't give players time to get bored by having them stand in long lines.
- Set aside time in each practice when athletes can just play the game, without receiving evaluation or feedback from the coach.

Structuring sport to be fun is key not only to motivation but also to helping athletes develop their skills. If athletes enjoy sport, they become more motivated. If they are more motivated, they improve. As they improve, they enjoy sport more. And so it goes.

Athletes who are motivated primarily by their need to have fun may present discipline problems for coaches who have sapped the fun out of sport. As these athletes try to find creative ways to have fun, they may be seen as goof-offs or discipline problems. Some coaches assume that athletes are not motivated when they balk at doing everything the coach's way. In reality, such players are often highly motivated to play—just not according to the structure and methods dictated by the coach.

The Need for Acceptance and Belonging

The second basic need athletes strive to fill through sport is for acceptance and belonging. This need can be met if athletes feel they fit in and are accepted by others on the team. In fact, some athletes play sport primarily because they enjoy being with their friends and being part of a team, and coaches can use this need as a powerful motivator. Here are some guidelines:

- Recognize that these athletes are usually responsive to team goals. Although performing well and winning may not be as significant to them as is identifying with the team, they will internalize team goals because of their desire to be part of the group.
- Arrange activities that allow athletes to get to know each other and spend time together. Social activities are a good way to help fulfill the need for acceptance and belonging.
- Include team building activities to help build cohesion. By working together toward a common goal that is not directly related to sport, athletes can learn to appreciate previously overlooked strengths in themselves and their teammates.
- Create an atmosphere on the team where athletes feel they are playing with each other rather than against one another.
- Have returning athletes serve as mentors to new athletes
- Ensure that all athletes feel they are important members of the team and that their roles are important and valued.

▶ The Need for Control and Autonomy

This need is important but easily overlooked. In fact, one of the most basic human needs is to develop autonomy, and this is especially true among adolescents on their journey to adulthood. Filling this need requires that athletes have control over their own lives and determine their own course of behavior. Once they choose to participate in a sport, they need to have ownership and feel they have a say in decisions affecting their involvement. Otherwise, they feel pressured or obligated to act, think, or feel a certain way. High autonomy encourages wanting to participate, whereas low autonomy means having to participate.

One of the best ways we can enhance motivation is to help athletes develop personal responsibility. Pressure to win, scholarships hanging over athletes' heads, and the apparent necessity to conform to coaching demands may cause athletes to feel controlled by coaches, reducing motivation. A wealth of scientific evidence (Deci & Flaste 1996) has come to the same conclusion: Deny people the right to control their own lives and you destroy intrinsic motivation, sense of achievement, self-responsibility, and self-worth. Grant people the opportunity to control their own lives and nurture their personal development, and you enhance these motivational qualities. Nurturing personal responsibility not only enhances autonomy and motivation, it also promotes athletes' personal development. Most coaches agree that sport should help athletes learn responsibility, but find it difficult to give them the opportunity to demonstrate responsibility. The problem is clear: When athletes are given responsibility, they do not always use it wisely. They do not always make the best decisions, and these errors can hurt the team's performance. Coaches who feel society's pressure to win, or who coach for their own ego enhancement, may be quick to withdraw such responsibility if it threatens their team's chances of winning. You can use several strategies to help athletes develop a sense of ownership and responsibility. When appropriate, involve athletes in decision making, provide choice, and request their input. You can do this, for example, by giving them a say in their training regimen. You can teach athletes how to develop their own training program, giving them more and more responsibility as they learn more about effective training principles. Encourage athletes to take as much responsibility as you judge they have the maturity to handle. Provide structure and guidance, giving more control as athletes demonstrate the wise use of responsibility. When athletes err in using their responsibility, constructively help them better understand how to act responsibly. Athletes should neither expect nor be given free rein, but they should be given choices within a structured environment.

The coach who facilitates this type of graduated responsibility development is not necessarily a democratic coach in every respect. Not all decisions are voted on—many are the sole responsibility of the coach. But by shifting some control to athletes, it is possible to develop a disciplined team where athletes feel a strong sense of ownership.

In summary, to meet athletes' need for control and autonomy, you should make sure they feel a sense of ownership over their sport involvement. Ways to do this include the following:

- Provide a rationale for your decisions.
- Ensure that athletes feel they are responsible for their own fate and are not merely pawns.
- Solicit athletes' input and provide choices whenever possible.
- Involve athletes in developing practice plans and game strategies, evaluating practices and competitions, developing team rules and a team covenant or mission, and selecting captains.

► The Need to Feel Competent and Successful

The need to feel competent is one of the most important components of motivation.

Perceived competence means having positive perceptions of one's skills and abilities and feeling capable of succeeding in sport. It is doubtful that athletes will work hard, or even stay in sport, if they feel like failures. Athletes use many sources to judge their skill and success at sport. Even the simple act of choosing up sides can influence athletes' feelings of competence. Always getting picked first by one's peers contributes to feeling competent, thus enhancing motivation, whereas routinely getting picked last may cause an athlete to feel incompetent and walk away from sport.

Athletes' perceived competence can be raised through success at challenging tasks, positive feedback from a coach, and approval from parents. Effective coaches spend a lot of time and energy structuring sport in a way that makes each athlete feel competent. Indeed, you as a coach are responsible for ensuring that athletes develop positive perceptions of their skills and abilities and feel successful at sport. You can use the strategies listed in the section on making sport fun to help your athletes' feel competent and successful. Additional suggestions are given in more detail in this book. Although experiencing success is central to feeling competent, experiencing failure is inevitable in the sport world, as in life. All athletes, no matter how talented, experience failure, adversity, and setbacks at some point. How athletes respond to failure has a huge effect on long-term motivation, and more information about preparing athletes to deal with success and failure is presented later in this book.



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