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KNOWING THE COACH

Emotional Management

3.1 Emotional Management

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3.1. 1 Introduction

This unit focuses on **emotions**. We shall begin by reviewing the concept of emotions and their relationship with behavior – with a special focus on how they relate to performance in sports. It is important that coaches understand what we are talking about when we refer to emotions. For example, what resources do we have to identify emotions? What techniques for emotional management can be used to improve athletic performance? Ultimately, we want to ensure that coaches are effective and optimal in their most important function as agents of change in a group setting.

We cannot disconnect from or even choose our emotions, nor can we ignore them. However, we can try to guide our emotions through emotional control techniques. This should not be understood as repressing our emotions, but rather, as a way of regulating them, and thus being able to alter our mood and our feelings when necessary. The objective of emotional control techniques is to prevent a negative emotion, when triggered, from dragging us down, dominating our behavior and leading us to behave in ways that are inappropriate or non-adaptive.

3.1.2 Emotions and Athletic Performance

Many athletes and sporting teams, despite being in optimum physical and technical condition, can find it hard to perform in such a way that their actions flow effectively. A lack of emotional control can prevent athletes and teams from overcoming situations, turning situations into performance conflicts or difficulties, both when training and when competing.

Athletes may verbalize this experience in some of the following ways:

“I find it hard to overcome pressure”

“I get blocked”

“My mind goes blank”

“I get annoyed when something doesn’t work out and I become focused on the mistake”

These statements represent feelings of low self-esteem and low capacity for reaction; they can occur both for players as individuals and for teams as a whole.

As Carrascosa (2003) says, “***we can talk about collective emotivity, although this term should not be considered as the sum of individual emotional responses***.” The emotional responses of different team members, contribute, to a greater or lesser extent, to the team’s emotional behavior.

It is important to bear in mind that emotion is a state. This is significant, given that there are two dimensions that coexist in one’s personality: *states and traits*. A behavioral trait is understood as a predominantly permanent behavioral manifestation that is sustained over time, which defines some of a person's essential characteristics. A trait does not usually change, it maintains itself in space and time. This differs from state-based behavior, which is transient and dynamic, and changes across time and space. A state does change.

Until recently, affect and emotions were given little attention in sport, with emotions seen as sign of weakness that got in the way of an athlete’s performance.

But:

Are our actions usually guided by reason alone?

We must not ignore our emotions. Rather, it is important that we manage emotions and intervene in emotional processes in order to benefit from them and avoid negative consequences.

In fact, emotions have been found to influence different cognitive processes such as attention, memory, decision-making and information processing. (Almazán, G., 2018) Retrieved from https://galaalmazan.wordpress.com/2018/05/24/el-deporte-y-las-emociones/

Different cognitive processes are activated depending on the type of sport (e.g. individual or group sport, high performance or amateur) or even the specific task the athlete is undertaking. Thus, the way in which performance is impacted will depend on how emotions affect cognitive processes, such as: *attention, perception, memory and decision-making*.

Attention levels are not free from the influence of an athlete's emotions. So, for example, high levels of anxiety can induce heightened vigilance of threatening stimuli.

Example 1:

> A basketball player is highly anxious, the match is entering its final stretch and the score is tied. He might be paying more attention to the little time remaining than to actually playing. His attentional focus on executing correctly will decline and this will have a limiting effect on his performance as well.

Example 2:

> A player has just overcome a serious injury and is afraid of a relapse. In this scenario, the player may be likely to focus more on the injured area than on playing, or on showing how fit they are in order to regain the coach's confidence.

Likewise, athletes' emotional states affect their perception and interpretation of a given situation, particularly future situations, which as such, do not pertain to the present. Performance will also be affected in this case.

In general, athletes with positive emotional states tend to consider positive future outcomes as more likely than negative outcomes.

Example: we might be talking about a player who is confident of victory and is capable of focusing their attention on mastering motor execution for every competitive action and disregarding variables that are out of their control, such as a match result.

The opposite occurs for athletes who tend to perceive negative emotional realities: the pressure of competition, feeling physically unfit, or a lack of technical sharpness are some examples that are linked with negative emotional states.

Our mood determines what is possible and what is not. If an athlete is convinced that she can achieve strong results in her next competition, this may be enough to achieve said results in comparison to those who do not have the same level of conviction.

Thus, when athletes find themselves in a negative emotional spiral because their team is losing, they might perceive the referee's decisions as less advantageous to themselves or their team, as compared to when than they are in an emotionally positive state.

Our motor skills (innate or acquired) are important resources, but alone they are not enough when it comes to reaching an ambitious goal in sport. We also need to appropriately control and manage our own emotions.

Can the fear of losing limit our audacity to be more aggressive in competition?

Can anger during a competition lead an athlete to make mistakes when choosing a strategy?

The answer to all of these questions is a resounding yes, even if one does not have sports-related experience or knowledge.

As we highlighted earlier, emotional stability is a determining factor in a myriad of cognitive processes involved in the execution of motor skills. Not only does it disrupt motor performance, it also affects decision-making, which is so important in team sports.

For example, we can think about the problem solving process and focus on how this occurs on the field of play. We can use the problem solving method (Figure 1) proposed by Bransford and Stein (1984), which poses the following phases in the process:

Figure 1: problem solving method.

Identifying the problem
Defining and representing the problem
Exploring possible strategies
Acting in accordance with the selected strategy
Achievement. Observing and assessing the effects of our action

Figure 1: Decision-making. Bransford and Stein (1984)

Who hasn't experienced one of the following feelings at one time or another:

"I won't be able to do it"

"This is too much for me"

It is important to understand that as much as we may try, it is impossible to control results through the decisions we make. Results can be planned, managed and reinterpreted, but they cannot be controlled. There is no way of knowing beforehand the benefits or difficulties that will result from a decision we take. Perhaps it is this illusion of control that sometimes results in a slowness or paralysis that can "haunt" us when making decisions.

In the exercise we are about to propose, beyond the description of the problem – and beyond the length of time that it has been established in our behavioral repertoire – it is important to identify the nature of the stimulus that causes a particular perception, so that we may immediately move on to identifying our resources and capacity for resolution.

Figure 2: Practice to identify the nature of a problem.

Identifying the problem	Defining the problem	Exploring possible strategies	Putting them into action and assessing the achievements
Is something wrong with me?	What do I feel? What do I perceive? How do I react?	In similar situations, I will try the strategy with which I feel capable	In training (it's easier and I can repeat it) I'm going to practice the strategy I decided on.

Source: Department of Sports Psychology FC Barcelona.

As can be seen in the phases mentioned above, emotions affect our cognitive processes when we analyze a problem. This includes the scope of the problem, the consequences that may arise from our possible actions as well as how we assess those consequences. As we have mentioned above, emotional stability, though hard to achieve, will guarantee optimal performance, especially with respect to decision-making.

Therefore, it is important to bear in mind our emotional state at any given moment, appreciating the impact of our emotional state on how we perceive reality and thus make decisions. It is not a matter of rejecting emotions, but rather of being aware of their influence and being able to manage emotional states to our own advantage.

3.1.3 Emotional Process and Athletic Performance

If we observe Figure 3, it will be easy for us to understand the process followed by our responses (thoughts, emotions, reactions) as well as considering the weight of earlier experiences. On some occasions, what cannot be seen in our behavior is more important than the visible actions.

Figure 3: Situation, response, consequence.

Situation	Response	Consequence
	Cognitive (what I think) Emotional (what I feel) Motor (what I do)	

Source: Carrascosa (2003).

The concepts in the table will be described below:

The situation: when we are talking about a situation, we are referring to a context or stimulus that provokes a response from the individual (i.e. the athlete or coach).

The response: when we refer to the response, we know that it is made up of three elements – the thought that generates the stimulus, the emotion generated by the thought and the resulting actions. In other words, the response will have a cognitive, physiological and a motor component: we think, we feel and we act.

The interpretation we make of our perception of reality will guide our response. Our thoughts and emotions are the precursors to our actions; they are the drivers of our behavior.

The consequences: When we talk about consequences, we are referring to how we sum up an assessment we make of the situation. This assessment will condition subsequent situations.

This information has been summarized in Figures 4 and 5:

Figure 4: Emotional process 1

Source: Carrascosa (2003).

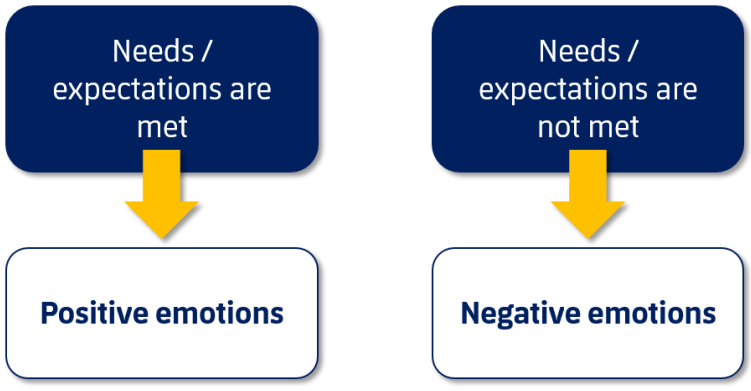
Figure 5: Emotional process 2

Source: Carrascosa (2003)

The way in which we interpret reality occurs in the span of mere seconds, generating an automatic, unconscious internal dialogue, the content of which is made up of selective recollections, preconceived thoughts and perceptions. Becoming aware of our emotions makes it possible for us to understand and interpret – to a considerable extent – our automatic thoughts, our belief systems and our value systems.

We must keep in mind that we process information directly in relation to our needs and objectives. Thus, apart from identifying our emotions to find the best way to manage them, we must take into account the influence of our needs and expectations, as indicated in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Needs and expectations.



Source: Carrascosa (2003).

The coach is key in how all of this works, as they can arrange and/or learn strategies to favor particular individual or team emotional states. The coach must also consider the following basic points in emotional control:

- One's perception of reality is unique.
- Not everything can be controlled.
- Adjust emotional control strategies, taking into account that they must be flexible, and that perseverance is required to achieve change and have confidence that change is possible.
- Strategies must be meaningful to each of the players.
- We must encourage a predisposition towards changing to new techniques for emotional control that are appropriate to the current situation, as well as to accepting that mastering them requires as much training as any other technical, tactical or physical skill.

When we reflect upon the variables or behavioral indicators that can be observed in a coach, we will arrive at the conclusion that the coach's emotional regulation has to do with him exercising leadership – in a fundamental sense – taking into account their athletes' needs and not just their own.

In fact, the comprehensive development of athletes has much to do with the presence of **guides** (typically coaches) who focus their pedagogical efforts on detecting and managing what the athlete needs for growth as an athlete on the path toward optimal performance – not merely athletic performance, but also personal development via sports.

Below are some of the main behavioral indicators that should be taken into account in every emotionally regulated coach, referring specifically to the leader's external behavior; their public and observable behavior, as reflected in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Behavioral indicators.

Source: Valdés (1998)

3.1.4 The Emotional Demands of Competition and Teams

Competition is a habitual situation in sports but one that generates unusual emotional states. The coach, as the group leader, must therefore take into consideration what each of their players needs at any given moment both before, during, and after competition, from a psychological point of view.

The requirements of competition are:

- Optimal arousal levels.
- Rapid emotional regulation.
- High levels of frustration tolerance.
- Regulation of cognitive arousal.

Here, we are talking about the need to put together a set of psychological skills that should take into account the acquisition of certain psychological competences or skills to be included in sports training programs, with a view to ensuring consistency in the athlete's performance. This requires

consistency, perseverance, continuity and commitment from both the athlete and the coach.

Figure 8: Psychological skill

Training plan in psychological skills
Program objectives Improving psychological skills
Learning sequence Learning the technique Learning the technique during training Applying the technique during competition
Techniques trained Life habits Relaxation/arousal techniques Attention control techniques Imagined techniques Setting objectives Competition plans
Action plan Assessing the learning of techniques Assessing the use of the techniques Assessing efficiency at the training level

Source: Department of Sports Psychology FC Barcelona

Each of the characteristics mentioned above has a common denominator: developing an attitude. In other words, these are behavioral patterns that favor the athlete's psychological adaptation to the demands of competition; that is, they can provide the athlete with the tools required to stay in sports – especially at a high level – or instead, they can lead the athlete to **give up** their sport altogether.

3.1.5 Healthy Emotional States for the Sports Coach

Since sports competition produces such a high demand on the coach's cognitive and emotional resources, in this section, we will describe what the specific strengths of a regulated coach could be, from an emotional standpoint, with the aim of establishing how to develop healthy states in a coach/leader's emotional management.

1) **Managing operational distance:** refers to the relationship style the coach implements with their athletes.

There are three operational possibilities:

Empathy: refers to putting oneself in the place of the other, and from there, understanding the needs of the player. It is fundamental here not to lose sight of one's role to be able to appropriately make decisions and direct training. Empathy is the most operational distance, it is a real strength of leadership. The other possibilities are sympathy and antipathy. Both are signs of weakness and vulnerability. In the case of sympathy, decisions are based solely on the athlete, not considering the coach and the necessities of the situation. **Antipathy**, on the other hand, directly does not take into account the athlete's needs when selecting how exert an influence.

Empathy allows us to understand an athlete's thoughts, feelings and actions, but it never yields the coach's leadership. It is an position that facilitates objectivity, characterized mainly by respect and fluid communication.

Sympathy, meanwhile, refers to the loss of subjectivity for the sake of being loved and accepted; the bond becomes one between peers, and from there a fair assessment is difficult. In contrast, antipathy is based on anger and **intolerance** for behavioral differences between the athlete and coach.

2) **Action level**: there are two modes of action that can turn into weaknesses for a coach: **paralysis due to analysis and compulsion to action**.

During paralysis, the coach is a mere spectator of the training process who accepts and takes on complaints, but does not generate changes.

With the compulsion to act (for example, insisting on repeating the same instructions despite not obtaining changes from the athletes), the impulse for solving and consolidating is so great that there is no time for assimilation; there is no time for the athlete to consolidate concepts, and thus, the concepts are often unclear, resulting in uncertainty for the athletes.

The coach's action level becomes a strength when they are able to anticipate and direct the training, working from concrete actions and giving time for the athlete to become an active part of training. Anticipation is essential because it reduces anxiety and uncertainty and facilitates developing abilities and practicing new or more complex skills.

3) Orientation of expectations: when the coach's expectations are oriented towards performance, this is a real strength, because individual differences are taken into account and respected, but especially because there is an impact on what the athlete learns and masters relating to motor execution, their effort and commitment. In addition, prejudiced typecasting of an athlete is avoided.

Meanwhile, the coach's anticipatory beliefs become weaknesses when they are focused solely on results and training is based on subjective evidence and sympathy.

4) **Decision-making**: it is indispensable to differentiate the coach's style from the content of their rationale.

Style is the way a coach usually reacts when faced with certain situations, whereas content refers to the justification of the decision itself. When the coach prioritizes foundation over style, their decision-making is a real strength, because it shows the highest degree of objectivity and consistency on their part.

When the focus is only on style, the static dimension of the coach's role is demonstrated – a dimension completely removed from situational demands. This does not rule out that in some situations, foundation and style may coincide.

5) Attributional style: when the coach believes that the success or failure of their athletes is due to themselves or the athletes, this is a real weakness. This happens because the training process is a dynamic relationship that involves the active participation of both parties. Personally attributing the successes of athletes is to believe that everything is under our control, which is an absolute fallacy, just as believing that failure is due to the poor performance of the athletes is thinking that one has no effect on them, which contradicts the role of the coach.

Responsibilities should be shared, with preponderance of one or the other participants in the relationship, but always taking both into account, both in successes and in failures. If the premise is to form autonomous athletes, it is necessary to document the degree of responsibility and participation they have in relation to the results obtained. Hold someone responsible does not mean blaming them. It enables forming associations between effort and performance.

6) State of control: when the coach seeks to control all of the athlete's behavioral variables prior to a competition, they invade the athlete's space for regulating emotions as well as their autonomy. At that precise moment, the coach should focus on achieving emotional self-control, finding peace of mind and demonstrating they are available without invading the athlete's space. That should be their strength during the moments prior to competition.

7) Social recognition: A coach can be considered suitable for working with elite athletes when they have attained independence from social recognition, when the eyes of parents, managers and the press do not interfere with their actions or vision and, above all, with their self-esteem and enjoyment of the activity. We all need the approval of others to increase and maintain our self-esteem, but when we depend completely on that approval and when the opinion of others is what is most important, it ends up distorting the direction of the coach's work. Coaches must train for the athlete and for themselves, they should not be a coach for the press, parents or fans.

8) Communication volume: the number of words that the coach is able to emit in a given period of time. This volume is a real strength when it is situational, when the coach knows how to read and respect the athlete's time and needs

and, accordingly, act with more loquacity or more moderation. When volume is determined by the coach's personal conditions, then it is a weakness.

3.2 Training in Psychological Emotional Competencies

3.2.1 Introduction

Previously, we have examined the concept of emotion as a dimension that can be trained by a coach. We have also seen the observable behaviors that make the coach a change agent for athletes' ability to control their emotions. In this unit, we will focus on strategies and techniques for managing the control of our emotions, making reference to the relationship between emotional intelligence and sports performance. Currently, a large number of Sports Psychology programs developed for the training of psychological skills – whether for sports training or competing – take this dimension of intelligence into account.

3.2.2 Basic emotions

Daniel Goleman (1996) points out that the main components that make up Emotional Intelligence are the following:

- **FEAR**: Anticipating a threat or danger which causes anxiety, uncertainty or insecurity.
- **SURPRISE**: Fright, amazement, bewilderment. It is highly transient. It can provide a cognitive approach to know what is occurring.
- **AVERSION**: Dislike, disgust; we tend to move away from an object that causes aversion.
- **ANGER**: Rage, annoyance, resentment, fury, irritability.
- **JOY**: Fun, euphoria, gratification, pleasure, gives a feeling of well-being, of confidence.
- **SADNESS**: Sorrow, loneliness, pessimism.

If we take the adaptive purpose of emotions into account, we might say that each of the different emotions has a different function:

FEAR: We tend towards protection.

SURPRISE: Helps to guide us in a new situation.
AVERSION: Causes rejection of what we have before us.
ANGER: Leads us towards destruction.
JOY: Leads us towards reproduction (we wish to reproduce the event that made us feel good).
SADNESS: Encourages us towards a new personal reintegration. (Euskadi, 2019. Retrieved from **http://www.euskadi.eus/)**

Figure 1: Description of the emotion and its functional value

Source: Department of Sports Psychology FC Barcelona.

3.2.3 Training in emotional management

Training to regulate emotions and improve performance can be realized through the following skills, taking into account that family and cultural learning have a strong impact on how each individual interacts with said skills.

1. Emotional self-knowledge

This refers to our capacity to understand our own feelings and emotions and how they influence us. It is fundamental to recognize how our mood influences our behavior, what our capacities are and what our weaknesses are. Most people are unaware of how their emotions impact on their lives.

In this sense it is important to understand that, in certain psychological states, it is better not to make decisions. If we are either too cheerful and excited or sad and melancholic, the decisions we make will be mediated by the intensity of the emotion. Thus, it is best to wait a few hours, or days, until our mental state is back to a state of relaxation and serenity, in which it will be easier to assess the situation and make far more rational decisions.

Case Study 1:

In a World Cup semi-final, the match is headed toward the final seconds of extra time; in the very last play, player X has the ball, shakes off his marker and finds himself face-to-face with the keeper; his shot is saved by the keeper, who launches the counterattack with which the opposing team scores the winning goal. The player takes on the blame for the loss and asks the coach to remove him from the starting sheet in the final match.

One way to modify how the player assesses their participation is to visualize the move from its start and not focus solely on the missed shot. The fact that the coach can support the player to modify his thoughts will facilitate the acceptance of the result, modifying negative feelings that would stop the player from developing positive emotional states for coping with the next match.

2. Emotional self-control (or self-regulation).

"Emotional self-control allows us to reflect and master our feelings or emotions, so that we are not blindly carried away by them. It consists of knowing how to detect emotional dynamics, knowing which are ephemeral and which are lasting, as well as being aware of aspects of an emotion that we can take advantage of and how we can interact with the environment to disempower emotions that hurt us more than they benefit us" (Goleman, 1996).

Buceta (2018) states that "in a certain sense, a considerable part of regulating emotions consists of knowing how to manage the focus of our attention, in such a way that it does not turn against us and sabotage us". Buceta (2018) proposes the following:

- Detecting situations that cause intense emotions that are hard to control (for example: an adverse score; playing badly; players who do not put up a fight, etc.).
- Establishing which emotion is caused by each situation (anxiety, annoyance, disappointment, euphoria, and so on) and quantifying its intensity on a scale of 1-10 (1 for minimum intensity; 10 for maximum).
- Determining the consequences of the emotion: how it affects the coach's work.

3. Self-motivation

Focusing emotions on objectives and goals generates in us the possibility of maintaining our motivation and fixing our attention on goals rather than on obstacles or difficulties. At this point it is important to achieve a certain degree of optimism and initiative, placing value in being proactive, and acting with determination and a positive outlook when faced with unexpected situations.

Thanks to our capacity to motivate ourselves to reach goals that – we rationally know – will benefit us, we are able to overcome obstacles that are only grounded in habit or in the unjustified fear of what might happen.

Establishing reachable and realistic objectives, but goals which represent a challenge (as illustrated in Figure 2), may be a good instrument for regulating the coach and the athlete's self-motivation.

Figure 2 Establishing objectives:

Defining the objective	Action plan	Assessment

Source: Department of Sports Psychology FC Barcelona.

4. Recognizing emotions in others (or empathy)

Interpersonal relationships are based on correctly interpreting the signals others express unconsciously, and which they generally convey using non-verbal communication codes. Detecting these emotions and the feelings they might be expressing through signs (e.g. a gesture, a physiological reaction, a tic) can help to generate and strengthen closer and more lasting bonds with those people with whom we relate, adjusting them to the needs of the moment.

In addition, recognizing other people's emotions and feelings is the first step to understanding and identifying with the people expressing them. Empathetic people are generally those who have greater skills and competencies related to EI (emotional intelligence).

5. Interpersonal relationships

When relationships with others are positive, respectful and caring, they are an indispensable source of personal happiness and sometimes even of good work performance. And this is related to knowing how to deal and

communicate not just with people who are close to us, but also with people with whom we find it difficult to communicate.

In emotional intelligence, we go beyond thinking how others make us feel, we also take into account that any interaction between human beings takes place within a certain context: perhaps if someone has made a deprecating remark about us, it is because they feel envy, or because they simply need to base their social influence on this type of behavior. (Bertrand R., 2018, Retrieved from https://psicologiaymente.com/inteligencia/inteligencia-emocional)

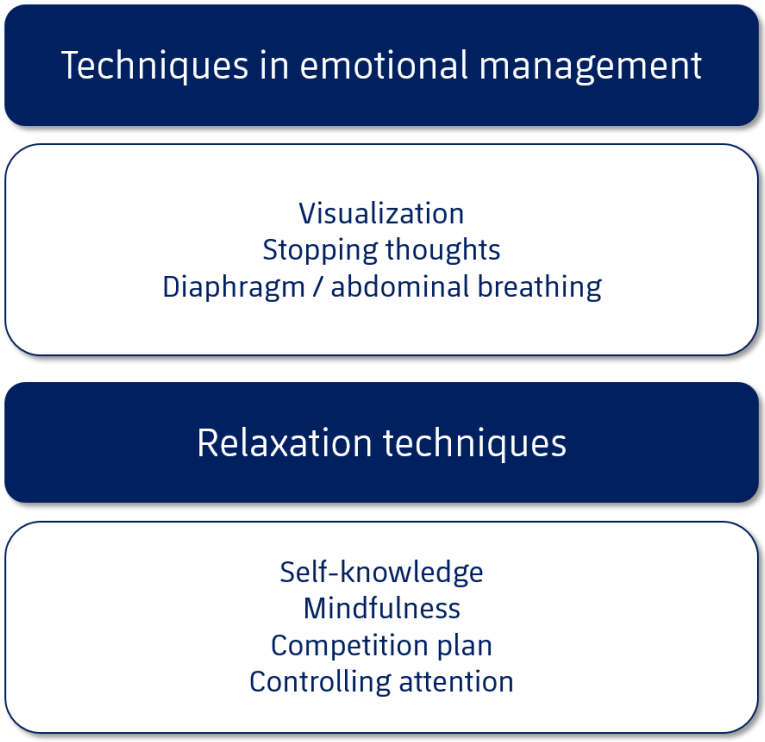
Summarizing what we presented above, it may be said that emotional intelligence helps us to think of the reasons that have triggered others to behave in a way that makes us feel a certain way, instead of starting out by thinking about how we feel and from there deciding how to react.

3.2.4 Techniques for emotional management

Anger, fear, frustration or euphoria coexist within an athlete every day, whether in training or in competition. Besides the emotions mentioned above; other emotions also emerge and shape the way we feel and see reality. Are they good or bad? Are they convenient or harmful? By managing emotions we can harness their huge potential in our favor, instead of allowing them to dominate us and putting our fate into their irrational and unpredictable hands. (Huertos C., 2016, Retrieved from https://www.saludmasdeporte.com/deporte-control-de-las-emociones/)

Below we will look at some techniques that are simple to apply and which we can practice over the course of our training sessions and matches, with the goal of optimizing the aforementioned competencies:

Figure 3: Management techniques



Source: Prepared by the author.

1. Visualization:

Visualization is a mental practice carried out several days prior to a competition or, on some occasions, only moments beforehand, which makes it possible to mentally experience specific situations that might occur on the day of the competition, which is ultimately the fundamental objective.

Among the benefits of visualization are an improvement in facing unexpected situations, an increase in self-confidence, and being able to recognize and manage emotions like anger, anxiety or fear. We outline an example below:

- Relaxation: this consists of closing your eyes, breathing deeply into the lower abdomen, and thinking about something relaxing or positive for 30 seconds to one minute.

- Locker room visualization: visualize your typical locker room habits just before going out to play, actions you do alone or with your team. Explore the emotions you habitually feel, observe your teammates around you, watch the coaches talk to the players, listen to what your teammates say, notice every detail, however small it may be. You have to visualize it as though you were there.

- Entering the field: Leave the changing room through the tunnel, see the opponents and wait for the referee to give the order to step out onto the field. What do you normally do? If you speak to somebody, if you greet the rival team, how do you feel emotionally at that precise moment? If you have any pains or discomfort anywhere, you should experience these feelings as well.

- Competitive situations (remember to visualize everything in full detail): your own teammates, the actions of your opponents, whether the referee is nearby and how he or she is moving, the spectators, whether it's cold or hot, what you hear, how you feel, bodily sensations such as the feel of the ground or the ball. As much as possible, experience the situation exactly is if it were a real match. In this case, the types of plays that each player visualizes will be different. Depending on one's position in the field, the responsibilities one has, areas for improvement, etc. Here I generally try to visualize five or six plays that I think might be important. For example, with the goal keeper, I try and do at least one play that might come up during the match: a corner kick, a free kick taken from either flank, a direct free kick, a one-on-one situation, a long distance shot, a cross.

- Relaxation: We try to return to a relaxed state as quickly as possible. Breathe deeply, breathing air into the lower abdomen and thinking about something relaxing or a positive memory, for as long as we feel appropriate. (Luque F. 2015 retrieved from https://futbolenpositivo.com/visualizacion-en-el-deporte-utilizacion-ventajas-guia-y-ejemplo)

2. Stopping our thoughts

This is a high-level cognitive technique, aimed at preventing the harmful effects of negative thoughts that generally invade an athlete's mind. This process consists firstly of identifying and recognizing these thoughts and stopping them by focusing on a mantra or key word (for example, "enough" or "stop"). It is at that moment that positive thoughts should be generated to substitute or refocus earlier negative thoughts. Although it is true that this technique requires a certain amount of training and skill, we can significantly improve aspects such as motivation or anxiety levels as a result. This technique is also known as the key word technique.

The athlete focuses on the thought that is disturbing them; instead of trying to avoid, ignore or flee from the thought, they challenge it. It doesn't want attention? Well, we will devote all our attention to the thought and, although our anxiety or fear may increase, we will remain focused on the thought for at least a minute. Right when this thought is at its peak, and anxiety or fear is about to overcome us – so much so that it becomes intolerable – we shout out loudly "stop" or "enough." We can choose any other word that works for us. The important thing is to realize that by yelling out the key word, all the negative thoughts in our mind stop. Once we have done this, we come back to reality. Although the difference might be subtle at first, we will soon notice that we are already more relaxed. But the process is not over yet, we must go in and evoke the thoughts once more.

The purpose is to repeat this task until that key word "enough" or "stop" allows us to focus on another more positive thought.

3. Diaphragm or abdominal breathing

One of the advantages of this technique is the speed with which it can be applied. It is a simple exercise that can be done anywhere and requires no prior training. It uses the resource of breathing to combat anxiety. It simply consists in breathing deeply through the nose in such a way that, instead of expanding the chest, it is the abdomen that receives the air (we can place our hand on our belly to make sure we are doing it correctly). After a short pause, the air is exhaled slowly through the mouth. Repeating this sequence for a few minutes has an immediate relaxing effect which is very useful, for example, in combating situations of anticipatory anxiety.

4. Relaxation techniques

There are many relaxation techniques which have been backed up by scientific research. The basic principles are described below.

- These techniques make it possible to learn the difference between tension and relaxation.
- Tension and relaxation are mutually exclusive. It is not possible to be relaxed and tense at the same time.
- Progressive relaxation entails systematic contraction and relaxation of each important muscle group of the body, following a sequence.
- Corporal relaxation through the reduction of tension will reduce, in turn, psychological tension. (Weinberg and Gould, 1996, p. 304).

5. Self-knowledge

Self-knowledge is an essential tool when it comes to achieving our goals and plans, and for materializing our personal desires.

Understanding our objectives and the tools we have at our disposal is the first step towards reaching the goals we have set for ourselves.

To do so, we propose the exercise shown below in Figure 3:

Figure 4: Steps towards recognizing our personal resources

Source: Department of Sports Psychology FC Barcelona.

6. Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a technique that consists of paying special attention to the present moment in a non-judgmental manner. Whether directly or indirectly, it will influence many of the psychological variables connected to sports performance, such as stress, arousal levels, attention, etc.

Furthermore, *mindfulness* also has a positive influence on an athlete's self-esteem and self-confidence; the "non judgmental" awareness that characterizes this practice has a positive impact on how we interpret successes or failures. This is also important for young athletes. Teaching mindfulness to children impacts their future well-being in other domains of human performance. The objective of mindfulness focuses on the idea that

optimal performance is a state which develops from the acceptance of our thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations without wanting to modify them, just accepting them without judgment.

Becoming aware of our emotions leads to an acceptance of our emotions, which in turn leads to a positive interpretation. This emotional self-knowledge and the emotional adjustment resulting from this self-knowledge – and from "being in the present" – encourages a positive state for athletic performance.

7. Competition plans

We very frequently find athletes who do not have a competition plan, who simply head into competition with the sole idea of winning, of achieving the best result. This is the fundamental reason for effectively executing an appropriate competition plan. The competition plan must be a road map, a series of technical, tactical, physical and psychological decisions that increase the probability of achieving a positive result at the level we have been training for. The existence of a competition plan also significantly reduces an athlete's anxieties and worries, as well as the likelihood of unexpected situations; it encourages self-efficacy and creates a positive disposition towards the competition.

The competition plan must be clear, realistic, and understandable. And crucially, it must be carried by the athletes. The athletes also need to have had enough time to practice implementing the plan, first in training and subsequently in competition.

Below, we will look at a model for building a plan for a competitive situation that includes all the essential moments of the competition (arrival at the sports facilities, warming up, pre-competition, competition and post-competition); it also includes the corresponding behaviors (thoughts, emotions and reactions) for any given moment within the competition.

And it ends with notes on distractions and the errors that were corrected. This is a very effective technique for becoming aware of one's behavior as an athlete within a critical moment, such as being in a competition. In this

way the athlete has the chance to anticipate and therefore plan out – prior to the competition – the variables that will generate optimum performance.

8. Controlling attention

Athletes who perform well in competition are experts in focusing their attention on the relevant stimuli in the environment and in maintaining this attentional focus for as long as necessary. Concentration, in other words focusing attention, essentially refers to the ability of the athlete to select the appropriate attentional focus for the situation, and to stay focused without interference from internal or external distractions. In other words, we define it as the ability to maintain attention on a chosen stimulus throughout a given period of time (**De Diego, S., & Sagredo, C**, 1992).

Below is an example of the development of attentional training:

Figure 5: attentional training

Learning to change attention	Learning to stay focused	Searching for pertinent signs	Testing concentration in the match
Trains the voluntary modification of attention styles in a comfortable and relaxed position, with eyes closed and under certain instructions.	Competent in maintaining concentration despite distractions and interruptions. For example, carrying out determined actions in a calm place with an object related to the sports practice.	Learning to focus attention on searching for pertinent signs (particularly important in fast-moving sports).	Visualization technique. There are numerous variants to train this resource.

Source: Adapted from Weinberg and Gould (1996)

In short, it can be said that training emotional variables connected to sports performance will result in athletes with higher emotional intelligence, who are more consistent, more stable, and thus more likely to perform at an optimal level. Below, will see the overall direction toward which coaches should strive, enabling athletes to feel that they are competing at the same level at which they are training.

Specific tasks are proposed for training sessions that will involve both coaches and athletes, in order to regulate their emotional behavior.

Profile of an emotionally intelligent athlete:

- Be a positive person
- Know how to give and how to receive
- Empathy (understand others' feelings)
- Recognize one's own feelings
- Be capable of expressing both positive and negative feelings
- Also be capable of controlling these feelings
- Motivation, hope, interest
- Have alternative values.

Intervention by the coach

The coach is responsible for teaching athletes how to be aware of and identify the feelings of relaxation and arousal that can accompany any athletic activity, thus allowing the athlete to learn how to identify and regulate such feelings.

- Identify with the team how to adjust the tension levels, or the arousal levels suitable for competition.
- Establish the appropriate level of intensity or tension in training, so that when shifting into actual competition, the team is able to continue experiencing the same general levels.
- Positive reinforcement in training of actions performed at proper levels of arousal.
- Introduce arousal control techniques into training sessions.
- While on the playing field, demonstrate the techniques that help to adjust tension.
- Encourage each athlete to observe and regulate their own level of tension, just as they have been doing in training, so as to favor their autonomy and create a routine in their performance.

Intervention by the athlete

- Learn to identify emotional signals.
- Learn techniques for regulating one’s emotions.
- Practice the techniques during the training sessions first, and progressively in competition.
- Organize and practice one's own routines.

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