One of the main social phenomena of the 20th century is related to sports practice as an organized teaching-learning process, which includes training and competitive devices. It is a social phenomenon around the world that does not seem to be slowing down in the 21st century.

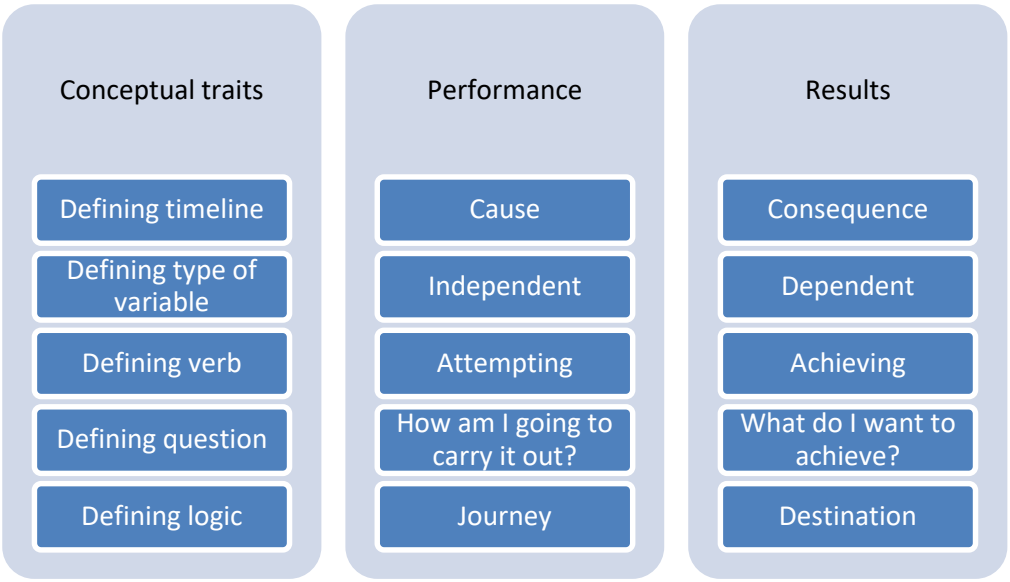
Generally, when referring to the various dimensions of an athlete's development, we focus on the acquisition of visible abilities (physical, technical, tactical, strategic) of sports practice for the person playing, as well as for their teammates, rivals and entourage. However, there is a hidden dimension that infiltrates those which are visible and is related to mental skills. Among these, the set of psychological tools that the athlete puts to use before, during and after practicing or competing in sports determines the quality of their athletic experience, both at a cognitive and an emotional level.

Therefore, mental strength is the construct of mental abilities that all athletes should develop to an optimum level in order to optimize the quality of their sporting experience.

It is important to highlight that the main objective of psychology of sports and physical activity is to optimize performance levels; it is not to win every match or always win the championship. On the contrary, the objective is to enable every individual to experience what they know how to do on a playing field, to the level that they are capable of, and enjoy each one of these behaviors.

Thus, we believe it is necessary to differentiate between the concepts of performance and results, not as exclusive from each other, but as complementary concepts that are distinct in themselves, as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Performance and Results: Conceptual Traits




Source: Prepared by the author.

Now we are going to focus on one of the main components of an athlete's mental strength: attitudinal development. Attitude is a vital disposition that the athlete must possess in order to respond to a variety of sports situations. It is a transitory, impermanent mental state. It is dynamic and susceptible to changes in its levels.

Following the same line, it is worth extracting one of the principal axioms of cognitive-behavioral psychology in general and the psychology of sport and physical activity in particular: thinking-feeling-acting. To be more specific, the authors De Diego and Sagredo (1992) define this axiom as "positive thoughts generate positive emotions and all this results in positive actions" (p. 144).

Another of the psychological variables which supports the attitudinal development is self-confidence. It is essential when talking about mental strength in athletes, since it is "the internal belief that we are capable of doing something, based on the competency of our own abilities to carry it out successfully" (De Diego and Sagredo, 1992, p. 146). In terms of self-confidence levels (scarce-optimal-excessive), they are related to the athlete's cognitive and emotional traits that determine concrete behaviors.

Below, we present the four states of attitudinal development.

Table 2: States of attitudinal development

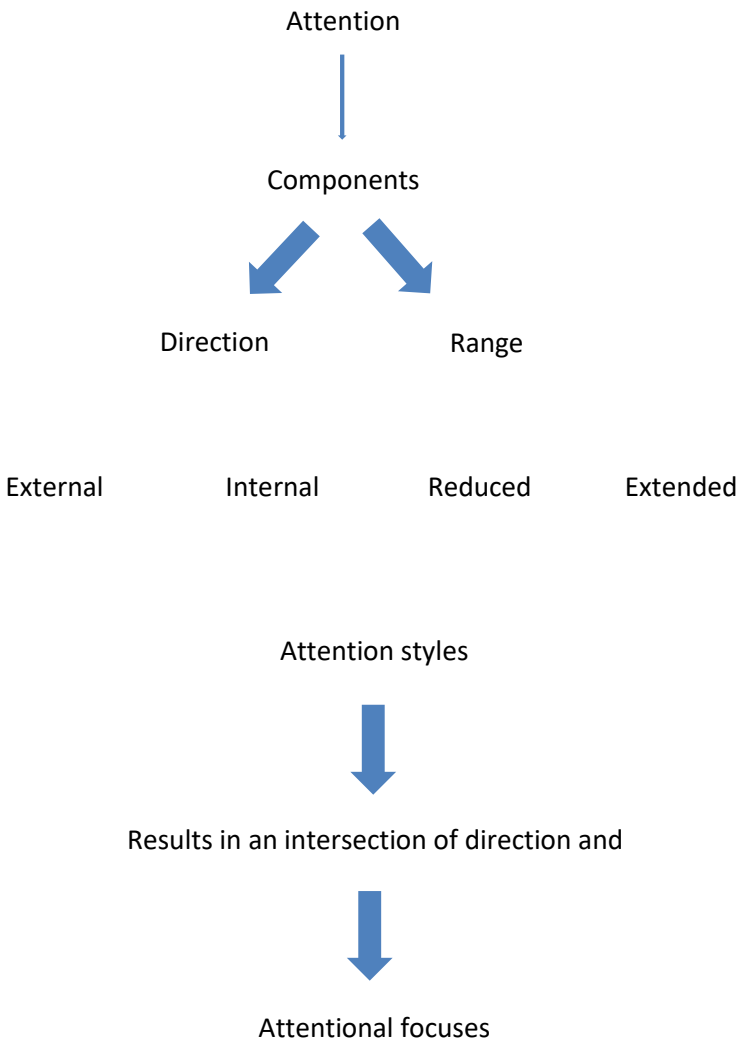
| Quitting attitude | Avoidant or apathetic attitude | Blocked or explosive attitude | Challenging attitude |
|---|---|---|---|
| Intensity or type of emotional energy: low and negative. | Intensity or type of emotional energy: low and positive. | Intensity or type of emotional energy: high and negative. | Intensity or type of emotional energy: high and positive. |
| Characteristic thinking: I do not want any more of this. | Characteristic thinking: Why should I keep on trying? I do not care. | Characteristic thinking: I want to, but I do not know how. | Characteristic thinking: I want to keep on trying until I achieve it. |
| Predominant orientation of objectives: no objectives. | Predominant orientation of objectives: Results (unspecific). | Predominant orientation of objectives: Results. | Predominant orientation of objectives: Performance. |
| Self-confidence levels: very scarce. | Self-confidence levels: scarce. | Self-confidence levels: scarce in many cases, and excessive in others, but never optimal. | Self-confidence levels: optimal. |
| Conceptual traits: sports practice linked to suffering, displeasure, distress and discomfort. They do not have achievement strategies, nor do they train according to them. | Conceptual traits: does not plan his actions. There is no proactivity or involvement in the process or sports situation (excessive distance). Levels of dissatisfaction, loneliness and lack of conviction. | Conceptual traits: plans his actions based on unrealistic possibilities. Self-punishment perspective. Anxiety to achieve the goal impedes having clarity in strategies. Doubt is the common denominator in this state. Manages his thoughts from cognitive vices. | Conceptual traits: plans his actions within his real possibilities, manages his errors from a constructive perspective, understands failures as useful feedback. Not scared of making decisions, of failure or dramas; experiences high levels of enjoyment. Perseverance, trustworthiness and flexibility in his actions. |

Source: Adapted from De Diego and Sagredo, 1992.

It is essential for the athlete to train his attention and concentration, central aspects that are defined by the perception of various stimuli at once and by focusing specifically on only one stimulus, respectively. It is vital for both mechanisms to work in a complementary fashion in the athlete, depending on each situation. Combining the effective use of these two psychological variables will have a great impact on the real possibility of optimizing the athlete's performance.

Let's begin with attention.

Figure 1: Attention: Components and Attention Styles




Source: Prepared by the author.

These attentional focuses are described below.

- Evaluation: quick reading of the environment. Athlete that adjusts quickly, large amount of information and external factors. May overload himself with information, systematically make the same mistakes and analyze the external situation before thinking about how to react.
- Analysis: plan game plays or strategies. Intelligent athlete, planner, strategic and tactical when in action, anticipates responses. Excessively analyzing his capacity can lead to paralysis due to analysis.
- Preparation: check his own physiological variables. Athlete who diagnoses an action, great introspective capacity and control of

internal components. Tends to become constantly blocked when analyzing himself critically.

- Action: Focusing on the object or sports situation. Athlete with clarity during athletic performance. But when the environment changes, the athlete does not know how to make a decision about how to respond to the presented changes.

Distractors are factors which infringe on the chances of the athlete having suitable attention and concentration levels, according to the specific athletic demand.

Table 3: Types of Distractors

| | |
|---|---|
| **External distractor** | • Boredom: unmotivated athlete because the stimulation level is inadequate. The coach should figure out if this is caused by the objective being too low or too high.<br>• Anger: disconnected athlete due to anger or frustration. The trainer should find out if this is due to internal distraction or an excuse.<br>• Hastiness: anxious athlete that interrupts his own performance rhythm. The coach should figure out if this is due to internal distractors. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Internal distractor** | • Dissociative thoughts: athletes with ideas and feelings unrelated to the sports activity. The coach should readjust the competitive attitude and thoughts. Reinforcements.<br>• Excessively analytical thoughts: athlete with paralysis due to analysis. The coach should redirect them towards the objectives, the activity itself and the results.<br>• Weak thoughts: athlete lacking self-confidence. The trainer should focus on the athlete's reaction. |

Source: Adapted from De Diego and Sagredo, 1992.

A third type of distractor which fuses external and internal aspects is worthy of mention and definition. This is the inability to change the way of paying attention, which tends to lead to blocking (De Diego and Segrado, 1992). It is an athlete stuck in his own mind and his bodily reactions. The coach should attract the athlete's attention with meaningful external stimuli to redirect the sports situation.

Following the contributions of Weinberg and Gould (1996) when they point out that "being capable of maintaining attention on pertinent environmental signals is key for performance efficiency" (p. 388), we focus on the following attention training suggestions to be carried out on the playing field or practiced in other moments or contexts.

## Attention training on the playing field:

- Training while distractions are present: simulation of competition conditions during training, adding external ingredients (screams).
- Utilizing agreed upon words: keywords that can be instructional or motivational, useful to modify a movement model or complex athletic behavior.
- Using non-critical thinking: the athlete tends to assign a positive or negative value to what they do. They should learn to evaluate their actions in a non-critical manner.
- Establishing routines: they help with psychological preparation and future performances.
- Visual control training: training visual focus on signs pertinent to the task.
- Focus on the present moment (Weinberg and Gould, 1996).

In terms of concentration training, we emphasize the following exercises and implementation methods.

Table 4: Concentration Training

| Learning to shift 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.

Previously, we broke down the mental strength construct in athletes. Now we are going to focus on the same variable, but of a sports team. We define it as all mental psycho-social variables that generate, in the environment of the individual serving the collective, optimal performance levels, in relation to the tasks at hand.

A team is not only characterized by being a collection of individuals, as the existence of a group depends on the interaction between its members. The following factors are key for group development:

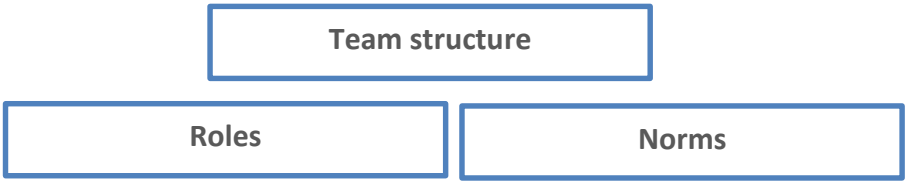
- Proximity.
- Differentiation.
- Similarity.
- Group objectives and rewards.

That said, "a group of athletes does not necessarily form a sports team. Forming a team is very much an evolutionary process. In fact, groups pass through a four-phase development sequence, ranging from grouping people together to the formation of the team itself" (Tuckman, 1965, as cited in Weinberg and Gould, 1995, p. 188).

Before moving on to a brief explanation of each phase (forming, storming, norming and performing phase), two dimensions are presented below,

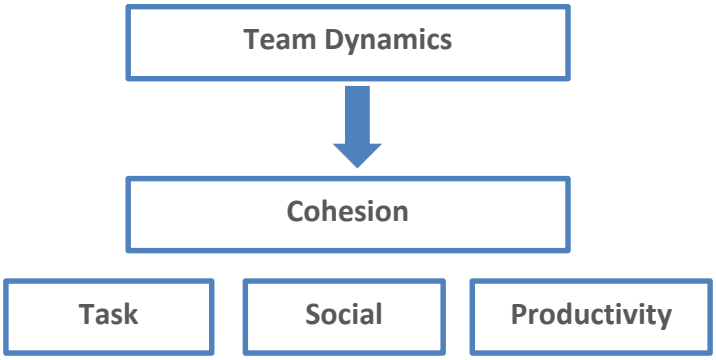
along with their respective concepts, which make up the diachronic and synchronic features of a team.

Figure 2: Team Structure




Source: Adapted from De Diego and Sagredo, 1992.

Figure 3: Team Dynamics




Source: Adapted from De Diego and Sagredo, 1992.

The figure below shows four phases with distinctive characteristics, which invariably are a part of the evolution process through which all groups of athletes have to go through to become true high performance teams.

Figure 4: Phases:

Source: Adapted from García Jiménez (s. f.).

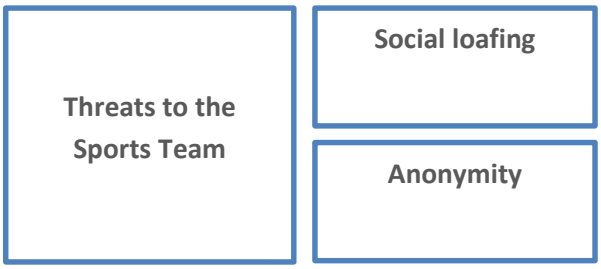
This evolutionary process is dynamic and bidirectional.

The threats and enemies of the perfect team are selfishness and individualism, which halt real team players' development of teaching-learning processes. In turn, it is necessary for athletes to really internalize the commitment's value and prioritize collectivism over individualism.

To develop the profile of team players, we should rely on the following behaviors:

1) Constantly pursuing the team's objective.
2) Building team collaboration skills .
3) Valuing each team member's contribution.
4) Learning to listen.
5) Increasing internal competitiveness.
6) Combating comfort in results.
7) Playing for results and glory.

Figure 5: Threats to the Sports Team



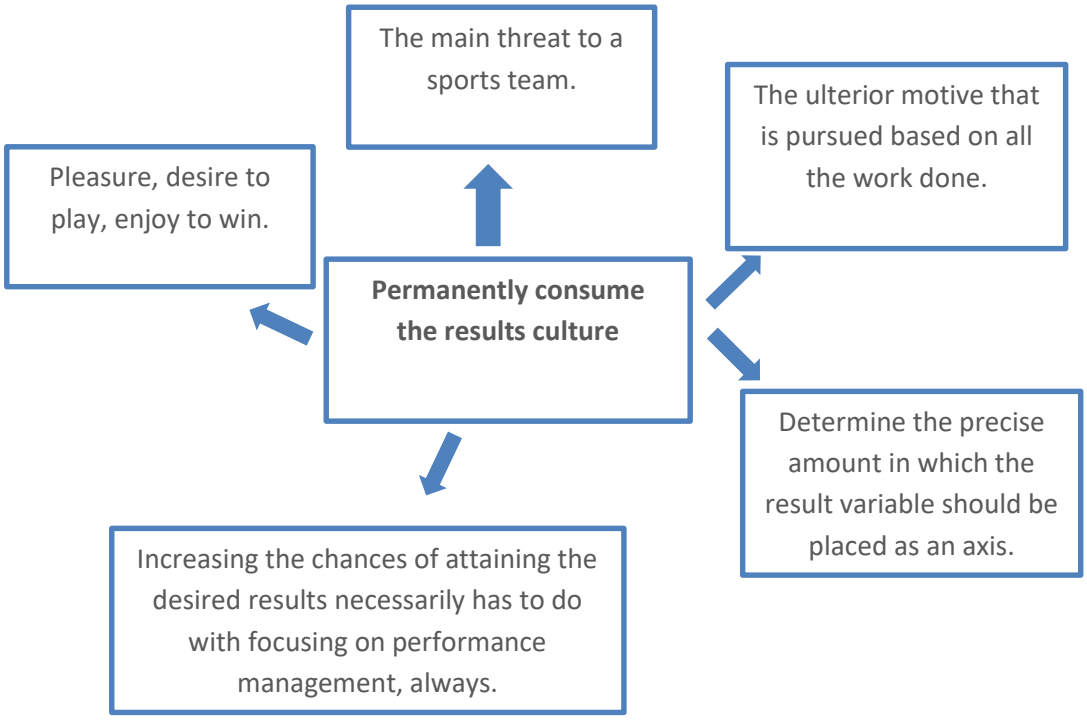

Source: Adapted from Weinberg and Gould, 1996.

Intervening in the athlete's behavior to increase the chances of the desired behavior appearing (or the undesired disappearing) is the mechanism by which reinforcement policy is developed in sports teams.

## Benefits of their application:

Eliminating social loafing and anonymity, getting rid of selfishness and individualism, encouraging the development of team players committed to the collective cause, consolidating the compliance with norms for internal coexistence, increasing the social and task cohesion levels, as well as motivating unmotivated athletes.

Figure 6: Results Culture: Characteristics




Source: Prepared by the author.

A leader's influence level is never neutral. Those who are led are always impacted to a certain extent; there are two mutually exclusive possibilities: either the athletes are influenced positively or negatively.

An inadequate emotional regulation level is known as coach injury. Athletes can also get emotionally injured stemming from their leader's injuries.

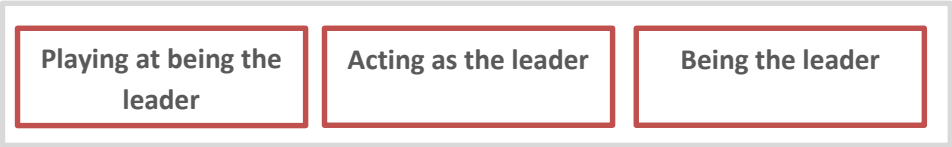
In short, an emotionally overwhelmed sports coach directly conspires against the athlete's mental strength levels.

*For the athlete, the leadership of his coach and the coaching staff is key, as well as the degree to which they are emotionally regulated.*

Now we are going to focus on sports training. Training is the kitchen wherein a significant proportion of the quality of the athlete's sports experience is achieved, regardless of age, gender or level of execution.

Three stages of leadership mental states are presented below, which have a direct relationship with emotional influence in athletes.

Figure 7: Leadership Mental States




Source: Prepared by the author.

The attentional level, activation level and amount of energy at the service of training are demanding, therefore acknowledging the emotional demand of high performance for the coach, developing as a coach, generating positive energy focused on internal motivation, incorporating more resources and not being so dependent on results are key factors when training, not only for the leader, but also for each of the athletes.

## The coach's emotional preparation

- Training frustration tolerance.
- Controlling cognitive activation levels.
- The development of compassion towards the athletes and his own actions as a coach.

Below, behavioral indicators found in an emotionally regulated coach are presented below:

- He sets performance objectives for himself.
- He measures his performance.
- He dares to learn.
- He asks for help.
- He engages in active listening.
- He wants to compete.

In addition, the coach should accept some issues: he does not have all the answers, he can make mistakes, his team can perform poorly, time is needed to grow and mature, and that enjoyment is at his fingertips.

During a sports competition, the team's emotional demand involves high energy levels energy, rapid energy regulation, frustration tolerance and regulation of cognitive activation.

In the table below, healthy and unhealthy emotional states for a sports coach are presented.

Table 5: Healthy and unhealthy emotional states for the sports coach

| Variable | Strength | Weakness |
|---|---|---|
| Managing Operational Distance | Empathy. | Sympathy and antipathy. |
| Action level. | Anticipating and directing training. | Observation paralysis and compulsion to act. |
| Orientation of expectations | Performance-oriented. Respect for individual differences. | Only results-oriented, subjective and sympathetic evidence. |
| Decision-making | He prioritizes rationale over style. | He only prioritizes style. Static dimension. |
| Attributional style | Shared attributions, active participation of both parties. | The success or failure of his athletes depends on him or on them. |
| State of control | Self-control and peace of mind. He is available for the athlete, without invading his space. | Obsessive control of the athlete's behavior. He invades their space. There is no emotional regulation. |
| Social recognition | He trains for the athlete and for himself. | Completely dependent on approval. The opinion of others is what is most important. |
| Communicational volume | Situational. He respects the athlete's time and needs and acts. | Determined by the coach's personal conditions. |

Source: Prepared by the author.

Last but not least, managing states of euphoria and rage in the sports coach can be compensated through relaxation techniques (muscle-mind relationship), management based on data (no biases), knowledge of the high performance journey and choosing the middle ground as the healthy emotional state. This should be accompanied by developing compassion (understanding, accepting and forgiving) and thinking focused on the present thought, without looking back on the past or anticipating the future. Toxic thoughts are negative thoughts, focused on the consequences of a *self-fulfilling* prophecy, while encouraging efficient thoughts causes a flow of positive thoughts with instruction on how to attempt performing, expressions of encouragement and memories of prior satisfactory experiences.

# References

De Diego, S., and Sagredo, C. (1992). *Jugar con ventaja* [Playing with the Advantage]}. Madrid: Alianza.

Weinberg, R., and Gould, D. (1995). *Fundamentos de psicología del deporte y del ejercicio físico [Foundations of Sports and Exercise Psychology]*. Champaign, IL: Ariel.