3.2 Self-Talk and Mastering Keywords

Introduction

In the next unit, we'll expound on one of the variables of cognitive support in the field of sports psychology: the self-talk technique.

Many authors have studied this technique, and while it was mentioned in the previous unit, we will analyze it in detail here.

3.2.1 Concept

Hardy (2006) defines self-talk as:

> "Verbalizations or statements addressed to oneself that are multidimensional in nature, that have interpretive elements associated with the content of the statements employed, that are somewhat dynamic, serving at least two functions: instruct and motivate."

This definition was used for many years until several authors deemed that it should be complemented by and revised based on studies conducted *a posteriori*.

Simply stated, self-talk is not the act of talking to oneself, since this is something that everyone does, in every line of work. In the context of sports, this act takes on added importance because one word can set off a series of reactions, which can be either advantageous or disadvantageous for athletic performance.

Zourbanos, Papaioannou, Argyropoulou & Hatzigeorgiadis (2014) claim that over the past few years, self-talk techniques have played a determining role in athletes' athletic performance and self-regulation.

Another definition associated with this concept poses that subjects interpret their state of mind and that based on this, they change, reinforce or regulate their behavior (Hackfort & Schwenkmezger, 1989).

When a player tells himself, “C’mon, one last effort to get the ball in the net,” that athlete is giving himself an instruction in regard to where to aim the ball because he believes it is his best option, but he is also encouraging himself by telling himself to put in a bit more energy, that it's about to run out. A tactical component and an emotional component merge, these having been trained and visualized beforehand in an attempt to motivate the athlete.

In the numerous studies carried out on self-talk, one of the authors who compiled the most definitions in order to reach a consensus has been Hardy (2006), who defines the practice as:

> “A verbalization or statement directed at oneself, that has a multidimensional nature, that has interpretive elements associated with the content of the statements employed, that is relatively dynamic, and which serves to instruct or motivate” (p. 84).

The earliest definitions distinguished two types of self-talk: positive and negative. The former refers to words of encouragement that can be said by a subject. More specifically, they put the athlete in the present moment. By contrast, negative self-talk is considered to be destructive: it robs the athlete of focus and holds him back from achieving his objective (e.g.: I’m very tired; my whole body hurts and I feel aches and pains; I won’t be faster than my opponent; I don’t feel well-trained and don’t know what I’m doing in this competition).

The problem identified by these authors arises because the concept is so broad that it cannot be broken down into two types (positive and negative). Gradations between the previously proposed extremes should also be considered (Hardy, Gammage & Hall, 2001). What’s more, it was found that, in some cases, negative self-talk ends up generating motivational impulses that cause athletic performance to improve, the opposite of what had previously been supposed. Sometimes, athletes describe this effect as an argument with themselves, in which their internal voice was telling them that they could not win or finish a race and, at the same time, another internal voice would not succumb to this first message and instead motivated them to silence that voice. This second instruction was the driving force they used to focus on what they had to do in the game.

One of the main objectives that we strive for in sports psychology is to give athletes tools so they can manage their thoughts and emotions in order to make decisions.

3.2.2 Theoretical Models that Give Rise to Self-Talk Techniques

Based on Beck's cognitive theory, which addressed questions related to depression, proposals were made to adapt it to the field of sports. This theory describes the negative cognitive triad and cognitive distortions. The former refers to the negative view that people have of themselves, the world, and the future. That is, an athlete might begin to reach conclusions of the "I'm not doing well" type (negative view of oneself), then move on to "There isn't anything that can help me right now" (negative view of the world) and finish with "I won't be able to win this match" (negative view of the future). This could be related to negative events in the athlete's past (a string of negative results, sports injuries, a lack of motivation, etc.). At times, this manner of seeing and relating to oneself and to one's environment can cause an athlete to experience a state of learned helplessness that anticipates defeat, accepts it ahead of time, and considers success an impossibility.

In high performance sports, the demands of training and, even more so, of competition, are so high that these kinds of invasive thoughts appear and disappear very quickly. The stimuli that generate cognitive distortions are associated with a variety of sources.

During competitions, each player will have a different interpretation of what is happening. Each perception differs depending on the sum of their individual experiences. It is perception that influences us, more than the game itself or our opponent.

Figure 1: cognitive distortions. Examples.

Distortion	Definition	Examples
Referees	Jumping to conclusions without evidence when they do not agree with the outcome.	The coach doesn't trust me: I won't become a starter.
Selective abstraction	Jumping to conclusions based on evidence taken out of context.	I don't finish matches in the physical condition that I'd like to.
Overgeneralization	Jumping to conclusions based on isolated facts.	I won't be a starter anymore: the coach has made me a substitute.
Magnification and minimization	Making mistakes due to issues that have been magnified or minimized.	I'm at my best (an athlete who has completed his first proper training session in a long time).
Personalization and self-reference	Attributing others' successes to oneself and inflating one's ego through collective achievements.	Everyone on this team is better than I am.
Superstitious thinking and catastrophic outlook	Making cause-and-effect connections based on unrelated facts.	On Mondays, I can only train in the morning. If I train in the afternoon, I won't be in good shape when I compete.

Source: Dosil (2004).

High performance athletes face very intense situations and physical demands. This produces, at the physical level, an elevated level of fatigue in which the body sends messages to the mind to stop subjecting oneself to this level of intensity. When this happens, the mind begins to generate

thoughts that are not related to keeping going but to stopping what the subject is doing. Here, something that athletes experience at all times manifests itself: the struggle between what they want to generate with their minds (continuing with the competition despite the physical demands) and what is happening to their bodies (elevated levels of fatigue). By means of cognitive self-talk techniques, athletes can work to silence physical signals and convince themselves that they are capable of continuing with their training sessions and competitions. It is a way of focusing on the dialogs they have with themselves when energy levels or mistakes cause mental and physical exhaustion. Thus, the mind is ordered be alert to the here and now and to direct its attention toward relevant matters (both game-related and emotional) to avoid obeying thoughts that do not contribute to athletic performance.

Athletes should feel that the situation is under their control and that their thoughts are contained. In this case, some authors talk about flow, a term that refers to thinking about only what needs to be done. How much, how, and when to think are variables that lead to the feeling that one has control over the situation, over their thoughts, and, therefore, over their emotions. For an athlete to achieve this state, they must have had prior training, not just at the technical-tactical level but also in training their thoughts and emotions and focusing them according to different situations. This will help them achieve that feeling of control. For example, a rower is facing a competition where there is a lot of wind (a circumstance that causes anxiety because he's not very used to it). If he has previously worked on feelings and emotions that could appear (I'm not prepared for so much wind; I'll exhaust myself too soon; I hope my rudder doesn't break) and practices thoughts that will be of help in those specific moments (I don't have too much experience training in wind, but I'm prepared for it; I'll sail intensely but calmly, step by step, without thinking of the bad things that could happen), this lets him redirect his thoughts in each circumstance that presents itself during the competition.

Vealey (1992) claims that athletes keep up their confidence using a system of beliefs about their motor performance capabilities. In regards to self-talk, it is connected with this system of beliefs because athletes believe everything they tell themselves. This makes it impossible to control athletes' internal dialog, since thoughts are invisible to others.

Faced with this impossibility, cognitive strategies, such as self-talk, have been refined in hopes of stopping the stream of negative thoughts.

Weinberg & Gould (1996) observe that some 66,000 thoughts are processed daily, of which between 70% and 80% are negative.

Authors such as Buceta (1998) propose a series of benefits to controlling variables, if self-talk techniques are mastered:

- Emotional stability is generated.
- Self-confidence and motivation are stimulated.
- Concentration is regulated.
- Athletes are inclined toward action.
- Athletes are prepared to face stressful moments.
- Successful behavior is reinforced.

Lorenzo (1997) indicates that self-talk is directly related to decisive behavior. Inappropriate thoughts and ideas manifest themselves as inappropriate behaviors. Depending on what one tells oneself, what manifests itself as external behavior can be modified by altering internal behavior (thoughts, emotions). In the case of a swimmer, an instruction is given by way of self-talk, such as, for example, "I must lengthen my stroke in the final meters while pushing harder with my legs" encourages a change in behavior during a heat.

The more we work on specific thoughts, for example, negative thoughts, the more the brain creates synaptic connections that are devoted to those thoughts and reinforce specific neural connections that endure over time. Some call this the "synaptic footprint." This term is usually used to refer to motor skills: the more a specific athletic motor pattern is practiced, the larger the synaptic footprint for this motor pattern will be. This tends to create a problem when it comes to modifying a motor pattern. The stronger the neural connection, the more difficult it will be to modify it. Something similar happens with thoughts: the more subjects think negatively about their performance capabilities, the harder they will have to work to change this thought dynamic and the behavior through which it manifests. If a player believes that he is no good when it is time to take a penalty shot, and he has had this idea since he was a child, then he will not be good at performing this task.

Weinberg & Gould (1996) use what happens at the information processing and self-talk level in specific situations during a tennis match as an example.

Figure 2: self-talk and its effect on athletic performance.

Event	Self-talk	Response
Failing at a critical point of the match	"I'll lose this match." "I'm a dummy."	Increase in muscular tension, anger, loss of enthusiasm.
Failing at a critical point of the match	"The match isn't over yet." "Concentrate on the goal."	Tranquility, improved concentration, optimism is maintained.
Aggravation of a sports injury	"I'll never be a starter on this team again."	Frustration and loss of hope.
Aggravation of a sports injury	"I'll have to work hard to recover."	Increase in effort, optimism, motivated to achieve the objective at hand.

Source: Weinberg & Gould, 2003.

Desirable thought patterns (positive thinking) are related to athletes' understanding that their behavior is a reflection of how they interpret the stimuli in their environment.

Some high performance athletes claim that during the competitions in which they performed best, they did not think at all. This means that the level of concentration achieved by this type of athlete (elite) is so elevated that no self-talk is generated at all. Concentration, as a psychological variable to train, is a cornerstone of achieving optimal results in sports.

Other examples of studies conducted on the subject of self-talk include that of Hanin & Stambulova (2002), who claim that analogies can be employed as self-talk strategies, such as: "I'm fast as lightning" or "I'm strong as a rock." According to the authors, these types of analogies lead to improvements in athletic performance.

3.2.3 Self-Talk and its Classification

Cratty (1984) was one of the first to attempt to interpret what athletes think. To do this, he differentiated between thoughts and proposed a set of categories to bear in mind:

- Place: Divided into specific (the field, the gymnasium, etc.) and general (the setting of any of the athlete's day-to-day activities). Training ground, everyday living spaces.

- Content: thoughts having to do with fears of competing or fears relating to the execution of a technical motor pattern during a critical moment of the competition. General: having to do with fears regarding opponents, tactics, etc. Specific: having to do with execution and performance situations that are soon to take place, such as the state championship, a training session devoted to backflips.
- Personal: thoughts that are instigated by people in the athlete's environment, or by the athlete himself. Whether they come up when the athlete is alone, with another athlete or with the coach.
- Intellectual: in this case, memory, the objective analysis of an opponent, or thought processes aimed at problem solving are utilized as resources. (Imagery, memory, analysis, problem-solving)

Authors such as Rushall (1995) suggest that the principal influence on thought formation is the setting in which the activities are performed. On this basis, he suggests that athletes employ a strategy of planning their thoughts based on competitions. The planning, practice, and mental recording of the thoughts that the athlete should have, not just before an event (a competition and/or training session), but also in each specific situation, prompts an improvement in concentration. If during a floor exercise, a gymnast has planned all the thoughts she must have with each breath before executing a series of diagonal floor exercises (e.g.: tensing up the legs during landing, sprinting after coming out of the first turn, bending the knees sufficiently to gain more altitude during the jump), this will help her to focus her attention on the relevant aspects of each element as well as on enhancing her control during these movements.

Applied research conducted on different athletic disciplines (swimming, long-distance running, wrestling, cross-country skiing) shows how important **content relevant to the task** is to improving performance. That is, when athletes, especially elite athletes, always choose the content of their thoughts.

Rushall (1995) claims that thoughts based on relevant content are more closely associated with improved performance than **positive** thoughts. He states that the latter tend to be trivial, while those related to the task have a more specific effect on what they are attempting to achieve. For

positive thoughts to not be trivial, he suggests that they serve a purpose for the subject, such as:

- Providing constant motivation.
- Allowing them to control their efforts.
- Evaluating the objectives to be achieved during each stage.
- Giving them control over self-talk at all times.

The author determines that there are two types of thoughts that can benefit the subject-athlete:

- Motivational words: using unvoiced words for the purpose of motivating and inspiring (e.g.: fight to the finish, you are better, you're trained for this).
- Thought intensifiers: maintain concentration and avoid distractions originating from the environment (e.g.: focusing attention on specific actions: up, swing the arm, turn).

Figure 3: Types of thoughts

The structure of athletes' thoughts	
Types of thought	**Characteristics**
1- Oriented toward serious competitive situations	Thought planning
2- Dividing up performance	Focusing thoughts on each segment
3- Content relevant to the task	Attention aimed at relevant stimuli
4- Positive thoughts	a) Self-motivation b) monitoring effort c) evaluating the goals of each segment d) keeping up with self-talk
5- Motivational words/intensifying thought	Complements of proper cognitive function

Source: Rushall, (1996).

Types of Self-Talk

As was mentioned at the beginning of the unit, dividing the concept of self-talk into two categories can be reductive, as it is a term that allows for the inclusion of a greater number of variables.

However, scientific publications are written taking as a premise the influence that positive and negative types of self-talk have on athletes during competitions or training sessions.

Before we review this literature, we will go over a list of definitions and a description of types of self-talk that focus on two specific types (automatic and strategic), which contain different subtypes, in order to cover the term's broad spectrum of meaning.

Automatic: refers to the kind of self-talk that the athlete did not put through the planning process beforehand. Athletes initiate self-talk spontaneously; it aims to achieve a goal but is not planned out. On the basis of intent, it can be divided into:

- Undirected or spontaneous: in this case, it lacks intent and conscious effort. Intuitive in nature. As for information processing, it manifests itself quickly, which may or may not be related to a specific context or activity. In turn, this is subdivided into: spontaneous goal-directed and spontaneous undirected. In the case of the former, the internal message (self-talk) is related to the context and to the activity that is being performed. In the latter, the content of the internal message is unrelated to the context and the activity being performed.
- Directed: conscious self-talk that athletes use to attempt to control themselves and self-regulate. This relates to both the athlete's current situation and desired situation, as well as how to link these two realities: current and desired.

Strategic: self-talk that does not arise spontaneously out of the situation that an athlete is experiencing, but rather has been planned beforehand. The subject utilizes a set of strategies, such as previously formulated specific words or short sentences, that he repeats to himself in situations in which using such resources is appropriate. Two types of self-talk are derived from this definition:

- Instructional: this is related to directing attentional focus, which focuses on biomechanical, technical, and tactical type variables. Clearly directed at an athlete's motor resources for proper execution. Using internal words or messages relates to the details of movements. As the name indicates, the objective of these self-instructions is to recall details during the execution of a movement or while processing of tactical information.

- Motivational: clearly directed at maintaining a positive emotional state or increasing or maintaining confidence levels.

Spontaneous self-talk is thought to be a window through which to access the thoughts and mind of an athlete, in which psychological variables manifest, such as in the case of causal attributions (it is my fault), assumptions related to performance (we won't win), the consequences of this (they will never trust in me again), motivational issues (I must win), the ability to self-regulate behavior (I don't understand what I have to do), and self-efficacy levels (I have what I need to do it).

As for directed self-talk (Latinjak et al., 2014), it is thought to be useful in the following ways:

- Cognitive restructuring (mistakes are part of the process).
- Cognitive control (I should concentrate on this game).
- Levels of confidence (we can win this game, no doubt).
- Control over arousal (I'll do my very best in this game).

Usefulness of Self-Talk in Sports Training

Over the years, and thanks to the progress made in the field of sports psychology, it is believed that, because of its positive effect on athletic performance, self-talk should be a priority objective when developing psychological techniques for mastery of this variable.

Because there is a growing wave of scientific research on the topic under study, we will now describe some of the contributions that these studies have made. Lane, Thelwell, Lowther & Devonport (2009) demonstrate that athletes who are skilled at managing their emotional stability and emotional intelligence improve their levels of self-esteem through the frequent use of resources such as self-talk. This demonstrates the direct relationship between the use of self-talk and improved athletic performance.

Raalte et al. (2000) found a direct relationship between the use of spontaneous, negative self-talk and lost points in tennis during critical moments of the match. In the moments when athletes experience anger or fear, the self-talk that is generated, if it is spontaneous, ends up emotionally impairing their performance.

As was mentioned at the beginning of this unit, most studies revolve around the consequences or benefits of using positive or negative self-

talk. The evidence available shows that in sports like tennis, positive self-talk produces positive results. In swimming, satisfactory results are obtained through the use of positive self-talk during 400-meter heats (Rushall & Shewchuk, 1989). The same authors applied this to elite-level rowers, and the use of positive self-talk also produced favorable results.

An interesting study carried out by Rushall, Hall, Roux, Sasseville & Rushall (1988) studied the use three types of self-talk among cross-country skiers: positive self-statements, task-relevant statements, and self-motivating mood words. The results showed improvement in 16 out the 18 athletes, which means that these techniques are useful for improving performance, if and when negative messages are not applied. The strategy of utilizing internal messaging benefits performance, which is why it is recommended that plans be made for athletes to utilize positive self-talk resources in specific situations.

Rotella (1980) claimed, in a study conducted on skiers, that using positive self-talk can, in some situations, impair athletic performance if it is not carefully directed toward what one wants to improve. That is, the use of self-talk during specific actions and at specific times. It is worth recalling that it is advisable to use it strategically, that is, planning and formulating it beforehand.

A study on tennis players demonstrated how they use audible self-talk and gestures during matches. This study shows that, most of the time, players carry on negative self-dialog before committing a fault or losing a point, and use positive self-talk less often. Although when it was employed, no favorable results were produced. This is due to the fact that it is rare in comparison to negative messages. To summarize, if athletes utilize positive self-talk, they do so less frequently than negative self-talk. Their emotions are therefore already dominated by anger, making it impossible to improve performance.

Studies carried out on the applicability of self-talk are oriented toward supporting athletes' use of this resource to improve their athletic performance.

Application Methodology

The following are the objectives that the field of sports psychology seeks to achieve through the use of intervention techniques:

- To gradually improve the psychological abilities of athletes, making these abilities part of a planned process.

- To adjust the expectations of athletes according to the reality and potential of the tasks to be performed.
- To stabilize behavior during training sessions and competitions.
- To improve the capacity for psychological recovery after frustrating events in order to face what is still to come.
- To have access to a spectrum of psychological resources and to master their application for each problem to be solved.
- To develop the ability to identify the appropriate moments in which to utilize psychological resources.

Taking the above into consideration, we can say that athletes utilize self-talk constantly and that trainers, along with sports psychologists, are the ones that are tasked with overseeing the application of this resource. It is important to see self-talk as a resource to be utilized and not as a nuisance that interferes with training sessions and competitions.

Athletes and the their teams are responsible for boosting their performance by using the resources that are available to them. Among all psychological variables, self-talk should be considered one of the variables that is most closely associated with the likelihood of success and improved performance. When athletes think and tell themselves that they are not capable of achieving something, they immediately lose their focus, their stress and anxiety levels increase, and the set of variables that impinges on correct physiological functioning spikes, resulting in diminished performance.

Internal dialog is manifested through behavior. When a player is able to objectively relate what he thinks about during specific situations when consulted by a trainer, this demonstrates a great deal of responsibility and maturity on the part of the player. This information should be gathered by trainers and psychologists in order to compile information in order to put together intervention strategies to implement with our athletes.

There is a dearth of investigative studies that differentiate between thinking styles among athletes who play team sports versus those who play individual sports. Group dynamics in team sports generate thinking styles that likely differ from those of a subject that plays an individual sport. On a team, the group tends to function as a stimulating or depressing factor, depending on what is occurs during a competition or training session. Therefore, collective reactions influence the thoughts of team members both positively and negatively. In individual sports, there is only the athlete and the upcoming event.

It is important to highlight that self-talk is a powerful tool that, like any other physical, technical and/or tactical factor, must be practiced. We should support athletes during training sessions and competitions so that they can take full advantage of this technique and can, therefore, improve their athletic performance.

When lending them support, the different types of self-talk, strategic and automatic, should be discussed. Also, it is important to master both instructional self-talk (in order to improve attention) and motivational self-talk (in order to maintain positive states of mind and increase or maintain levels of confidence), both of which pertain to strategic self-talk.

It is also important to work on and to let the athlete discover the different thoughts that may come up during both training sessions and competitions. It is important for them to learn about different kinds of thoughts and self-talk so that they might be able to face a variety of competition scenarios with the utmost capability and best performance possible.

At the same time, athletes should be able to appropriate self-talk, formulate their own messages, and give them meaning. When self-instructions are formulated by the athlete himself, the effect will be greater than if the messages are formulated by trainers and/or sports psychologists. The subject should be able to utilize their own mode of expression and their own words to generate a motivational instruction or message.

3.2.4 Keywords

Throughout this entire unit, we have been talking about self-talk and its different types. Next, we'll look at another type of self-talk that has to do with specific instructions players give themselves regarding a specific tactical-technical aspect of a task. This technique's objective is to direct attention towards specific aspects of their performance just in time to perform an action and do so successfully.

The aim of using a keyword is to concentrate on relevant stimuli in order to improve the athlete's performance, avoid distracting thoughts and/or to focus when distractions arise, encourage learning techniques and tactics and, lastly, for a trainer and a player to share a common language, not just during competitions but also during training sessions, as regards putting techniques and tactics into action.

One of the advantages of this technique is that not only can athletes come up with their own keywords, but they can also count on the bench as an "accomplice": the trainer, who, knowing the keyword that players uses, can remind them when there is something that requires their attention.

The keyword technique must meet some conditions in order to be effective:

- It must be suggested by the athlete so that he can identify with it, although this doesn't rule out the possibility that the trainer might collaborate on and contribute to its creation. It is recommended that the keyword be shared, since that way the trainer can put it into practice and prompt the athlete during training sessions, matches or competitions.
- It must be short (1 or 2 words) or could also be a sound associated with the action to be performed.
- It must be based on something positive.
- It should be related to the stimulus that requires attention.
- It should be related to the action.

Lastly, we will provide an example of how to implement the keyword technique:

The keyword technique allows the athlete to focus his attention on and be aware of specific technical or tactical aspects of a task in order to perform them just at the right time. So, let's think about, for example, a tennis player who appears to be experiencing difficulties when serving; he has negative thoughts that do not help improve his performance when he has to prevent an opponent from defending his serve. The keyword should enable him to eliminate those thoughts by focusing on the technical aspects of his serve. After analyzing his serve, the tennis player chooses the key movements for proper execution, during which he must focus his attention (bend his legs, raise his racket, swing his racket). The athlete should be capable of encapsulating those elements in a single idea. By asking the right questions, the athlete arrives at his keyword, allowing him to gather up all of these technical aspects and focus on proper execution. The tennis player chooses the keyword "Wide" to make sure he performs the entire movement without stiffening up, or maybe he chooses to count off "1,2,3", keeping time with the elements that he previously identified (bending his legs, raising his racket, swinging his racket).

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