

Psychological Keys for Sports Competition

Sports competition, besides being an athletic confrontation, is a stressful event, a clash of emotions, a momentous encounter between personalities. No athlete comes out of a competition the same way he went into it. Emotions deregulate, thoughts are absolute and calmness and moderation are conspicuous in their absence in the majority of cases.

Competition exposes athletes and coaches, magnifies actions and makes them important, whether they are positive or negative. Competition has an audience effect, which escalates high levels of social anxiety. What do they think of me? How do they see me? What do they say about my mistakes? Do they see my successes? Competition is a great showcase that demonstrates not only the athlete's and coach's repertoire of technical, tactical and physical behaviors, but also their emotional and psychological world.

Unfortunately, in many occasions competition makes it clear that many athletes, sports teams and coaches suffer when put to the test. They do not endure competitive stress well; they become emotionally overwhelmed and their response level is completely impaired. They train very well, but they compete poorly and, crucially, they are ever less eager to compete.

It is necessary to emphasize that, in fact, media coverage of sports, whether through conventional communication media or through social media, transforms the phenomenon of sports into a social phenomenon. Everything is immediate; favorable and unfavorable results are being constantly speculated with positive and negative consequences for the athlete and coach, and all this staggering quantity of information that surrounds the sport and the sports competition implies that the competition is continually becoming a more momentous event.

In many instances, this media momentousness does not merely affect the athlete's emotional world, but also his social relationships and the impact that these media messages create in his social context, as a new world is configured through personal and collective results and performances. Therefore, given this scenario, a sports coach must emit clear messages and must be a capable manager of the athlete's and team's uncertainty.

Throughout this module, we will try to show the recurrent thoughts and emotions during periods before the competition, as well as the effect that these thoughts and emotions create on the athlete's and coach's behavior, and we will try to offer some mental keys to face competition in the best way. Similarly, we will try to address the athlete's and sports coach's



emotional state in the post-competitive period. We will specify the different emotional states before and after the competition and we will bring together concrete behavioral tools to achieve emotional regulation, both in athletes as well as in sports coaches.

3.1 Pre- and During Sports Competition. Mental Keys

Pre-competition is a time charged with tensions and uncertainty about the result. Worries about one's own performance and doubts about if one will be able to reach the desired result make the athlete experience high levels of anxiety before the competition, and at times, he begins to get stressed out. Before the competition, performance worsens and coordination is affected as a consequence of the psychological tension that the athlete experiences.

Due to this, the coach must not create expectations that the athletes will give his best performance as the competition approaches. The axiom to follow is **less exposure the closer you get**. Exposure will be more on the mental level than on the physical level. So, given this situation of uncertainty, what should a coach do so as to be ready for the circumstances of the pre-competitive stage?

At first, it is recommended that the coach try to dispel the athlete's doubts and uncertainties and not increase them. The best way to do this is to offer a clear and feasible game plan that the athletes have mastered and can execute. Accordingly, the coach dispels the athletes' doubts when clearly assigning the roles that each one must perform in the competition and offering tactical support so that each athlete feels a sense of self-efficacy before the competition.

Throughout our professional practice, we have found many coaches who, with the aim of hiding information from their opponents, end up alienating their team at the last moment. This is not recommended; at the very least, in the relationship with his athletes, it is recommended that a coach dispels doubts and uncertainty with sufficient time in advance. If he wants to have a showy game against the rival, that will be an action that the coach will decide, but when it comes to the team it is recommended to prepare each athlete with clear assignment and with sufficient foresight before the competition.

The closer to the time of the competition, the more the athlete's perceptual field reduces and the more his attentional field becomes more rigid. For this reason, it is not suggested to conduct big tactical chats or to reveal magic keys for the game in the moments before the competition, because, most likely, the athlete does not have the sufficient capacity to process this valuable information and, as a consequence, his performance will not match what is expected.



The more competitive experience that an athlete has, the greater his capacity for pre-competitive processing. Even so, it is not recommended to abuse this capacity, so the specific suggestion to move through this pre-competitive stage in the best way is to anticipate the game plan and the role that must be performed and offer support to the athlete to dispel all doubts.

There is often a silent enemy during pre-competition that attacks the youngest players and which it is necessary for the coach to adequately manage. This silent enemy is free time. The athlete is accustomed to having all free time taken up by trainings, extra sessions and other activities associated with preparation but, when the competition begins to loom, this preparation load lessens and the athlete finds himself with free time. Usually, this available time is considered necessary so that the body can rest and the mind can prepare to compete adequately.

However, when the athlete is worried about the result and has doubts about his performance, free time tends not to be the best ally; in fact, the athlete starts to doubt and to jump from one doubt to another, and each doubt in turn begins to generate real thought ellipses that not only mentally exhaust him, but also impede the physical recuperation necessary to face the competition in the best way possible.

It would be ideal for the coach to get the athlete to have no doubts about his performance and worry about the result, but it is not always so simple to achieve these feelings. Due to this, especially when athletes form part of "pep rallies" before the competition, we recommend planning and executing actions that do not have to do with the sport, that is, playful or recreational actions that lead the athlete to focus his attention on something other than the competition. In this way emotional energy is enhanced, the attentional field becomes more flexible, and psychological tensions subside.

But the pre-competitive stage not only affects athletes, but also, and crucially, the coach. Sports coaches also tend to be worried about the team's performance and be uncertain about the result. In many cases, this emotional state is transmitted to the athletes, and the effect is counterproductive. The coach must also have a pre-competitive routine that lets him reduce tensions, change attentional focus and regenerate his energies. In some cases, aerobic tasks are recommended to avoid and prevent sudden mental over-activations in coaches.

The worried coach makes others worry. Coaches must take charge of managing their emotions in order to create the best climate for their team. It is not the team that should regulate its coach's emotions with good interventions. The coach must stave off doubts and eliminate tensions, not create them. This challenge is very complex, especially in contemporary



contexts where the media is always making the result momentous, weighing it as the only noteworthy thing for a sports coach.

An emotionally trained sports coach must know what information should be consumed before the competition, what activities will help him regenerate his emotional energy and how to avoid constantly thinking about the game plan and his athletes' abilities.

During the competition, the coach must be very aware of the fact that his interventions are operative and must be decisive. The athlete may be hyper-active, his attentional field has narrowed, and in many cases, he finds himself in a state of gridlock due to failed or unforeseen performances that predetermine the result of the competition. Facing this scenario, the coach must redirect the athlete's performance with precise guidelines or directions.

The coach that does not become an additional stress factor to competition is already taking an important step for his team, and if, besides that, he can, with a few clear directions, redirect performances or untangle an emotional block, he will be performing his role to the best degree possible.

Competition is very complex. The coach gets frustrated, gets angry, becomes short-tempered and often tries to give directions to his athletes from an emotional state. For this reason we find coaches who offer a huge number of directions that are impossible to be processed by the athlete, or else coaches that unwittingly become stress factors as a consequence of their inopportune moves and abrupt emotional reactions.

Competition requires and demands emotional regulation on the part of the coach, as well as clarity when sending messages to the athletes. This challenge requires the coach to undertake a lot of emotional training, as well as have absolute clarity about his role and empathy for the athletes' needs.

3.1.1 Pre-Competition Emotional Regulation

From what has been explored above, it is possible to infer the need to reduce tensions during the pre-competitive stage. It is necessary for the coach, before performing any activity to emotionally regulate his athlete, to incorporate analysis spheres that allow him to accurately detect the pre-competitive profile of each of his athletes, to determine later what action is most affective for emotional regulation.

Below, we will present five axes of analysis that the coach can make use of to detect their athletes' emotional regulation.

- Motivation.
- Cognition.

- Behavior.
- Physiological Reaction.
- Interrelation.

Table 1: Five Axes of Analysis: Detection of the Level of Emotional Regulation of Athletes

State	Optimum fighter.	Pre-start fever.	Pre-start apathy.
Motivation	High motivation. Confidence in one's own strength. Interest in competing.	Excessive motivation. Exaggerated level of aspiration. Overestimation of strengths.	Low motivation. Lack of interest in competition. Insecurity.
Cognition	Concentrated attention. Guided thinking. Sharpening of perceptions.	Guided attention. Unstable. High sensitivity.	Unfocused attention. Memory difficulty.
Behavior	No change during miming. Calm face. Good control of movements.	Tight lips. Blinking. Reduced accuracy.	No smiles, passive body language. Non-energetic movements. Little initiative.
Physiological Reaction	Acceleration of heart rate. Balance between the processes of inhibition and excitation.	Accelerated pulse. Shallow breathing. Redness of the skin.	Decreased heart rate. Fatigue, feeling of weakness.
Interrelation	Habitual personal relationship within the environment.	High communication intensity. Irritability. Impulsiveness.	Abrupt decrease in interpersonal contacts.

Source: Prepared by the author based on García Ucha, 1997.

The manifestations that are most easy to detect in an athlete are those that have to do with his public behavior: his interrelationship with his situation, his behavior and his physiological reaction, in that order. But, surely, the trigger of these changes is found in the athlete's private

behavior, that is, both in motivations and cognitions. That is why the coach needs not only to manage the athlete's public behavior, but also take care of his private behavior.

When choosing an action to regulate the athletes' emotions in the pre-competitive period, we recommend, regardless of what action is chosen, that it be considered as a technique that demands learning time to be incorporated, a reception time to be consolidated and a careful exposure time so that it offers the desired effects in stressful situations. In many cases, coaches expect that the technique chosen to reduce tensions and regulate emotions will offer automatic effects, and that is impossible.

Generally, the technique is discarded due to the fact that these results do not appear immediately. In this manner, it becomes clear that the problem does not lie in the technique itself, but rather in its manner of implementation.

There are different techniques for anxiety reduction and relaxation, from muscle to mind and from mind to muscle. For example: the objective that is sought with relaxation is to facilitate a strategy for the athlete or coach that lets them to control their activation level or, in other words, an instrument that can be applied when their anxiety has increased or when they feel stressed (Dasil, 2004, p.377).

Below, we will simply mention some general principles and we will let the reader look into these techniques in due course to pick out which they consider to be the most effective and suitable. These, demand knowledge for their implementation and a careful time for learning about the conditions for execution, short-term effects, and medium-term and long-term results.

Basic Principles of Progressive Relaxation:

- It is 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.
- Corporal relaxation through the reduction of tension will reduce, in turn, psychological tension. (Weinberg and Gould, 1996, p. 304).

Breathing Control Procedure:

- Inhalation: Inhale deeply and slowly through your nose and note how your diaphragm presses downward. Breathe with your stomach and diaphragm in a comfortable and relaxed way, and then let the air fill and expand through the central and upper part of your chest. When you breathe in, push your stomach completely outward. This inhalation phase should last about five seconds.
- Exhalation: Exhale slowly through your mouth. You should feel the muscles in your arms and shoulders relax. As you exhale and relax, you should start to feel centered and grounded on your support surface. Your legs should feel relaxed, though solid and firm. The complete exhalation phase should last about seven seconds. It is important to exhale slowly and continuously. (Weinberg and Gould, 1996, p. 307).

Autogenic Training Phases (Johannes Schultz):

- 1) Heaviness in extremities.
- 2) Warmth in extremities.
- 3) Heart activity regulation.
- 4) Breathing regulation.
- 5) Abdominal warmth.
- 6) Cooling of the Mind" (Weinberg and Gould, 1996, p. 309).

3.1.2 Reviewing the Competitive Knots. Focus on the Competitive Plan

How can the coach keep the athlete from always thinking about the result and, in so doing so, transform himself into prey of uncertainty? The key to escaping obsession with results has to do with guiding the athlete's attention towards performance, towards the intended game plan for facing the competition.

We very frequently find athletes who do not have a game plan, who simply face the competition with the sole vision of winning, of achieving the best result. This, as we have already mentioned several times, is the consequence of effective execution of an adequate game plan.

We recommend that all sports coaches formulate three questions when analyzing competitive results with their athletes:

- 1) Was there a game plan?
- 2) Were they able to execute the game plan?
- 3) Was the game plan wise?

We consider that a main focus of the coach's execution lies here, in managing these three questions, which can lead the athletes to begin to address performance more and, by extension, increase their possibilities for achieving results. It is clear that the stress of competition clouds the mind in many cases, closes the attentional field and deprives the athlete of effective ideas that guide his performance. As a consequence, their execution is significantly impaired.

But the first activity that the coach must do is to define a game plan so that the first question is effectively solved. The game plan must be a road map, series of tactical decisions that increase the probability of achieving a positive result. The existence of a game plan also significantly reduces athletes' anxieties and worries, encourages their self-efficacy and creates a positive disposition towards the competition.

It is necessary for this game plan to be clear, understandable and—crucially—that it is executed by the athletes, as well as that he has enough time to practice its implementation.

Reviewing said plan in the pre-competitive period demands focusing on the execution nodes and not the whole game plan. The essential parts of the game plan are the *nodes* and there cannot be too many; rather, there should only be a few, and the tactical message should be worked out around them before the competition. The game plan is presented, clarified, and practiced with enough time in advance and only the nodes are reviewed. Why only the nodes? Because the athletes' perceptual field is reduced before a competition, because their pulses are highly accelerated and their processing of relevant information is minimal. So one must not transfer worries nor talk about a lot of things that will jumble priorities, as this will lead to the athlete leaving the pre-competition chat with the understanding that there are dozens of execution nodes.

The next question deals with the implementation of the game plan to begin to assess the athlete's transfer level when facing competitive stress. If the transfer is adequate, congratulations; if not, he must be redirected to the exposure stage to achieve greater habituation. When the athlete knows the plan and is clear on the nodes, but cannot implement it, it is necessary to revise the planning and design of the phase of exposure to competitive conditions. The healthiest option is to keep making performance the focus, in order to break the obsession with results.

In certain cases it is also necessary to formulate a third question: Was the game plan wise? It is important to have enough emotional maturity as a coach to accept the possibility that not only athletes make mistakes, but



coaches can also get confused or misread a certain precedent and, as a consequence, design a flawed game plan. It is imperative that the coach has this magnanimity, so as not to end up always blaming the athletes' emotional difficulties when in fact they have none and their behavioral transfer level is high.

High performance means having a game plan, reviewing the game plan's nodes, with prior emotional preparation to adequately transfer said plan and posterior analysis of the same and of transfer levels. Performance should be made to be the focus so as to increase the probability of achieving the best results; it is the very crux of competing well.

3.1.3 Attentional Management during Sports Competition

Athletes who give good performances 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. Essentially, *concentration*, that is, focusing attention, refers to the ability of the athlete to select the appropriate attentional focus to the situation and hold in 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 (from Diego and Sagredo, 1992, p. 188).

A sports coach must know how to guide his athletes' attention, especially during the pre-competitive stage and during the competition itself. First of all, the coach must learn to recognize the existence of the main attentional focuses and must determine what attentional focus is the priority for each stage of athletic training and competition.

Table2: Four Different Types of Attentional Focuses

Broad — External	Broad — Internal
Used to rapidly evaluate a situation. For example, the type of attention that is initially required during a fast-break in hockey or basketball.	Used to analyze and plan. For example, the type of attention used to develop a scheme or strategy for the game.
Narrow — External	Narrow — Internal
Used to focus oneself on one or two external signals without getting distracted. For example, the ball.	Used to mentally and systematically review an execution situation and to direct and/or control physical arousal. For example, mentally reviewing a hit to get the hole in golf or focusing on breathing to reach a state of relaxation.

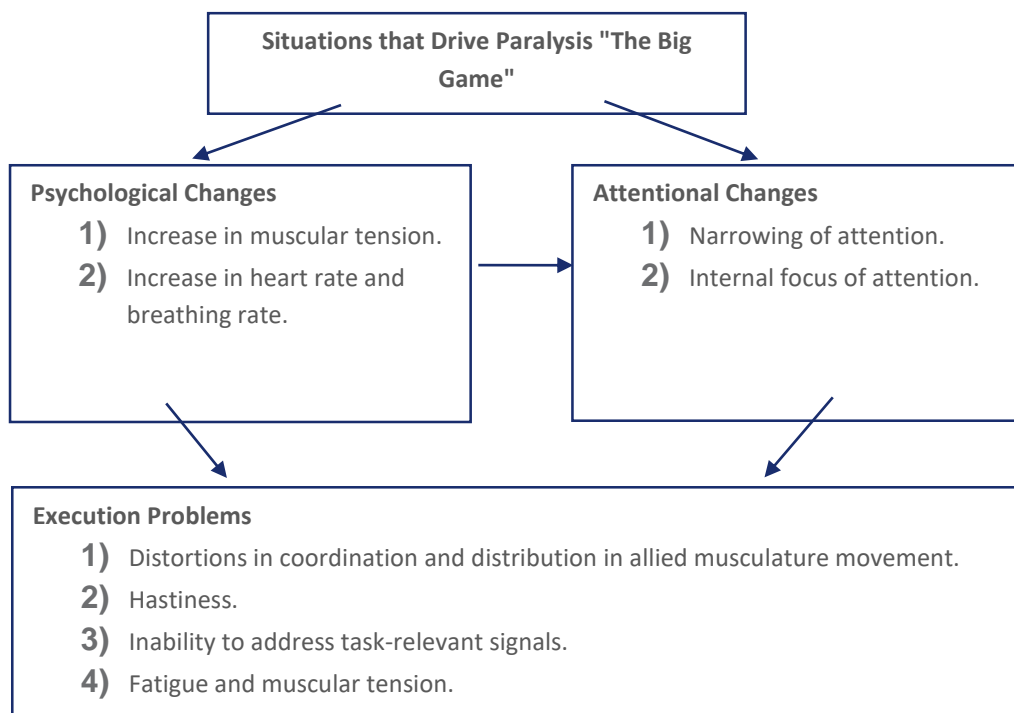
Source: Prepared by the author based on Williams, 1991.

The best levels of execution in competition happen when the athlete can handle external signals from the environment and, as a result, make automatic decisions. Attentional flexibility and the ability to move from one focus to another depending on attentional demand determine the competitive high performance profile.

Frequent attentional deficits happen when the athlete, as a consequence of a failed or unexpected execution on the part of his rival or a judge's decision, gets caught up on an internal focus and keeps competing without addressing relevant signals or the game plan. In these cases, a teammate's or coach's action proves essential in redirecting athletes who are paralyzed. The attentional field is completely narrowed, and in the majority of cases the athlete's main distraction is self-reproach or anger at himself, at a teammate, at a coach, at a judge, or at an opponent.



Figure 1: Interaction between Psychological and Attentional Processes in Highly Stressful Conditions



Source: Prepared by the author based on Williams, 1991.

In these situations of paralysis or blockage, the athlete's execution level is significantly impaired. Likewise, as he really cannot pull himself out of his thoughts, he becomes completely unable to redirect his attention. In cases that allow the coach to have down time to redirect the athlete, we recommend not allocating all this time to offering new and abundant tactical and technical directions because of the imminent possibility of losing the competition.

We recommend first capturing the athlete's attention, getting him out of his head and once there giving one or two directions at most. To recover our attentional level, recover we can come to use physical contact as a strategy to connect through a non-auditory channel, as said channel is completely trapped in his internal discourse. A coach should capture attention, reduce tension and offer a direction. This is the game plan to combat an athlete's paralysis.

3.1.4 Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Communication during Competition

It is clear that competition creates an impact, that emotions deregulate and that one of the spheres that is most affected is communication. Due to this, during competition we can find athletes that act out their communication through screams, that express their anger and that, at

times, become aggressive with peers and rivals, judges and other people in the environment. We can also find athletes that become completely blocked by the competition and cannot communicate with the outside world, such that they communicate only with themselves. Communicational extremes, inhibition and aggression, are often expressed in different sports competitions.

The athletes' communicational profiles not only become distorted, but also, at times, the first victims of this type of communication are the coaches, whether overstepping the edges of the field of play or completely paralyzed. Let's not forget that we are always communicating, either from excess or deficit, and the message multiplies and impacts the athletes during competitive situations. At times, young coaches that are quick to emotionally deregulate during a competition act as stress factors and add an extra amount of emotional pressure to the competitive situation, which in turn demands more resources and more coping strategies from the athletes.

In that case, can communication be regulated during the competition so as to be really effective?

Professional practice has shown us that communicational deregulation during the competition, whether it be on the part of the coach, the athletes, the coach with the athletes or the athletes among themselves, is due to the stress of competition, the emotional shock that the competition creates, but also—and crucially—it is due to the lack of communication training. It is necessary for athletes and coaches to learn to communicate in stressful situations. In the exposure to competitive conditions phase, one should work attentively on the model for communicating during competition.

The model for communicating during competition is based on basic and simple questions which are very possible to reach and be trained:

- Who will be the communicator?
- What should they communicate?
- How much should they communicate?
- How should they communicate?

Communication is a skill that is inherent to the human condition, and we fundamentally draw upon the number 1 axiom of Paul Watzlawick's *Theory of Human Communication* (1971), that clearly expresses **the impossibility of not communicating**. A person is constantly communicating: with gestures, with emotions, with words and with silence.

During competitions, in critical moments within the team, everyone talks at the same time as though nobody had the assigned function of directing



the team's communication. At other times, mostly in unfavorable times, nobody speaks, nobody directs and nobody gives orders. It is necessary for the coach to define those who are responsible for communication during the competition, design a training program for them and communicates it to the whole group of athletes. In stressful situations, effective communication is conspicuous in its absence, and this affects the athletes' performance and the team's results.

The second question to be answered is very important for developing a model for communicating during competition, namely: What is communicated? The person or people responsible for communicating on the team must professionalize their competition communication and emit messages that only respond to the needs of their teammate or of the team, and not the need to act out their satisfaction or dissatisfaction about sporadic situations. In most cases, the communicational content responds to positive or negative emotional messages that appear as a result of a given execution. The message is perceived as a consequence and not as a cause.

Communication helps to anticipate and direct athletes. The coach must develop this function off the field and some athletes must develop it on the field. The point of communication is not to annoy the person who makes a mistake or to reward the person whose executions were successful, as there are already those who are sympathetic to that. Professionalizing this skill is a very complex task that demands a lot of training, awareness and clarity of role from the person executing it.

Communication should come from precise tactical directions, not from emotional assessments. Guiding, leading and directing demand clear and concrete concepts that can be processed by the athlete in stressful situations.

The third question that makes up the model for communicating during competition has to do with the quantity of communication: How much is communicated? A reasonable and necessary amount. How much is reasonable and necessary? It is very difficult to answer this question, especially if we keep in mind that all human beings are both similar and different, but surely the quantity should be low. It should be low for one simple reason: the athlete is in a state of hyper-activation and, as a result, cannot process too much information. In this sense, more information that clarifies is better than a lot of confusing information.

Finally, the last question that informs the model for communicating during competition refers to the following conundrum: How should one communicate? Information science and communicational theories tell us that a message's impact is higher when non-verbal messages accompany verbal ones. It is necessary for coaches to strive to develop their non-verbal language so that it boosts their verbal message's impact. The

problem happens when a verbal message goes in one direction and the non-verbal message goes in the opposite direction. The most common example is the hopeless coach yells with all his might from the edge of the field of play, while ordering his team to be tranquil.

Table 3: Model for Communicating During Competition

Who communicates?	The coach or the athlete assigned.
What Is Communicated?	Tactical or technical directions.
How Much is Communicated?	A small amount, clearly
How is the Communication?	Verbal message + non-verbal message.

Source: Prepared by the author.

