

CONNECTICUT INTERSCHOLASTIC ATHLETIC CONFERENCE

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CIAC COACHES UPDATE

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VOLUME III ISSUE VIII DR. BOB LEHR,

This month's issue of Update has two different articles. The first one deals with a topic that anyone with a child or children playing a sport has faced - what do I say to my child after a contest? What do I say if his/her team won, what do I say if the team lost? What do I say if my child did not play well? I know that I have personally faced those questions and most of the time I undoubtedly said the wrong thing; it may have been well intentioned, but it was probably not what my child wanted or needed to hear at the time.

The other article is lengthy, but I believe it addresses an important topic for today's coaches. Previous issues of Update featured articles on periodization. The accompanying article on periodization deals with the mental skills part of training as it applies to periodization. I believe that any coach who wants to be successful over an extended length of time will find the accompanying article beneficial.

Good luck to all of our fall sports coaches as they prepare for the CIAC tournaments!

Bob Lehr, Editor



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JUST SIX WORDS

Parenting is hard, because it's complicated and full of doubt. As a result, we parents tend to try harder, because we want, quite naturally, to get involved, to fix things. We think it's about us.

Which is why I love the approach of Rob Miller and Bruce E. Brown, who run a coaching outfit called Proactive Coaching LLC. In their quest to understand what makes a successful parent, Miller and Brown used a stunningly simple method: They asked kids what worked.

For three decades, Miller and Brown made a habit of asking college age athletes about the ways their parents had made a positive or negative impact. After several hundred interviews with a wide cross-section of kids, their informal survey had two insightful discoveries.

Number one: what kids hate most, by an overwhelming margin, is the conversations during the ride home after the games. You know, that quiet, strained, slightly uncomfortable time when parents ask questions, give praise, offer critiques, and generally get involved by saying things like:

Great job today. So what happened on that play?

What did your coach tell the team after the game?

Do you think the team could have hustled more?

These types of moments, Miller and Brown point out, are well intentioned, and often contain truth, but the timing is toxic. The moments after a game are not the time for judgment or pressure and definitely not for instruction (which is the job of the coach, not the parent). In fact, many of the kids said they preferred having grandparents attend games, because they are more joyful and less pressurizing than parents.

But it's not all bad news. Because there's a second finding to emerge from their work, and it might be the best parenting tip I've ever read.

The kids reported there was one phrase spoken by parents that brought them happiness. One simple sentence that made them feel joyful, confident, and fulfilled. Just six words.

I love to watch you play.

That's it. Six words that are the exact opposite of the uncomfortable car-ride some. Because they reframe your relationship—you stop being the watchful supervisor, and you start being a steady, supportive presence.

I love to watch you play.

A signal that sends the simplest, most powerful signal: this is about you. I am your parent, not you coach or your judge. You make me really, really happy.

I love to watch you play.

Try it out, like this parent did. I know I'm going to.

Let me know how it goes. blehr@casciac.org

The Periodization of Mental Skills Training in Coaching

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At the 2013 National Coaching Conference in Colorado Springs, two of the current authors presented on how coaches could use the concept of "periodization" to implement effective mental skills training (MST) with their teams and athletes (See Simpson & McCrath, 2013). During the workshop case studies and examples from the authors' applied work with collegiate soccer were used to demonstrate the core concepts behind periodization. This article is a follow-up to that presentation and aims to provide coaches with a framework from which they can integrate mental skills into practice and competition while applying the principles of periodization.

Coaching Philosophy and Team Mission

Before implementing the principles of periodization for MST, we recommend that coaches first reflect on their personal coaching philosophy in order to consistently prepare their athletes/teams optimally for competition from year to year. Coaching literature (see Martens, 2004) and anecdotal accounts from successful coaches such as John Wooden, Pat Summitt, Bill Walsh, Phil Jackson, and Mike Krzyzewski suggest that in order to successfully plan long-term coaches should clearly define their coaching philosophies. Martens (2004) stated that a coaching philosophy should consist of what you want to achieve (i.e., your objectives) and how you will achieve this (i.e., your beliefs on how to achieve those objectives). To begin clarifying a coaching philosophy we suggest that coaches reflect on the following questions:

- How do I currently coach?
- What characteristics/qualities do I want to be known for?
- What is it liked to be coached by me?
- How do I want to communicate with my players/athletes?
- What would I like my players/athletes to say about me when I retire?

Ultimately, a coaching philosophy provides a consistent framework for a coach to reference when making difficult decisions and facing ethical dilemmas.

In addition to developing one's coaching philosophy, several coaches and sport psychology consultants advocate for sport teams to develop a mission statement. Team mission statements serve to clarify team goals (Janssen, 1999), and provide an agreed upon direction for the season. We recommend that coaches encourage their athletes/teams to develop a team mission statement at the start of each competitive season (e.g., teams should identify the behaviors needed to have a successful season, the commitments they are willing to make, the work ethic needed in practice to achieve their goals, and the style of play they want to be known for, etc.). While coaches should assist in creating the team mission it should be driven and shaped by athletes. When athletes develop the team mission statement it promotes a greater sense of ownership and commitment to the team goals. Together the development of a coaching philosophy and team mission statement provide a foundation from which coaches can think "big-picture" and begin to build their long-term plan for effective training from year to year.

Periodization

The concept of periodization has been around for several decades in the strength and conditioning literature. Essentially the goal of periodization is to ensure an athlete's performance peaks at the right times (usually aligned with a competition or specific tournament), while simultaneously avoiding problems such as overtraining, staleness, burnout, and injury (Holliday et al., 2012; Wathen, 1994). Periodization must be carefully planned to maximize all areas of performance, while

also considering the ongoing development of the athlete (both mentally and physically). Holliday et al., (2012) summarized the concept by stating “periodization is designed to account for individual needs, maximize individual development, and peak athlete for major competitions and calls for training cycles to be developed around personal and scheduling considerations” (p. 203). In a previous Olympic Coach magazine, DeWeese, Gray, Sams, Scruggs & Serrano (2013, winter) proposed a new definition of periodization:

The strategic manipulation of an athlete’s preparedness through the employment of sequenced training phases defined by cycles and stages of workload. These workloads are varied in order to facilitate the integration of planned programming tactics that will harmonize the relationship between training-induced fatigue and accommodation. Further, the process of balancing stress stimuli and recovery periods should be based on advanced knowledge regarding the physiological, biochemical, and psychological principles related to human performance. Thus, an individual’s response to training can more effectively be measured and be made apparent through the execution of a comprehensive athlete-monitoring program and ongoing scientific study (p. 14).

This new definition promotes a modern approach to periodization and highlights the need for comprehensive athlete-monitoring systems by using empirical evidence.

Cycles of Periodization

In DeWeese and colleagues new definition of periodization the terms “cycles” and “stages” of work describe critical components. These specific periods of time are used to organize training over the long-term and each cycle or stage should have a predetermined goal (e.g., technical development, physical fitness, etc.) aimed at helping athletes peak their performance at the right moment (Holliday et al., 2012). While different terminology has been used in the literature to describe these cycles or stages of work, Wathen (1994) uses the terms preparatory, competitive, peaking, and recovery, which the current authors have found to better resonate with coaches. The four stages progress sequentially and are equally vital for effective periodization. Holliday et al. (2012) described the four stages as follows:

- Preparatory stage: usually occurs during the off-season and is designed to prepare athletes for the upcoming rigors of competition.
- Competitive stage: the regular competitive season and is designed for consistent play.
- Peak stage: the postseason or major competition(s) when athletes must maximize their performance.
- Recovery stage: following the conclusion of the peak stage and is designed for physical and mental recuperation.

Through our applied experience we have found that irrespective of the sport, coaches can break down a season using these four stages. However, some sports may require athletes to peak at multiple times during a calendar year (e.g., track and field athletes aiming to peak at specific meets/competitions) whereas, other sports may just have one peak stage (e.g., college soccer and NCAA championships). For coaches to successfully implement these stages into practice it is important that they look at least one calendar year in advance and break down the season into these four stages. After breaking down the season, coaches should write down what the focus should be during each stage (e.g., technical development, tactical development, physical development, mental skill development, etc.). For example, in the preparatory stage it may be more pertinent for coaches to focus on the physical (e.g., fitness) and technical development whereas, the focus of the competitive and peaking stages may shift focus towards tactical and mental skills.

Workload

A key periodization principle included in the DeWeese et al. (2013) definition is workload. To avoid the detrimental effects of training (e.g., overtraining, staleness, burnout and injury) workloads for athletes must be individually monitored and altered to ensure it is balanced. Workload consists of two main concepts, volume and intensity. Volume relates to amount of training (i.e., time, number of reps etc.), whereas intensity relates to how hard that volume is executed. The concept is relatively simple; if the volume (amount) of training is high the relative intensity has to be lower, but if the intensity level is high then the volume must decrease. High volume and high intensity training for sustained periods is likely to result in the detrimental effects of burnout, staleness, or overtraining (Holliday et al., 2012). In order to strike a suitable balance

between volume and intensity coaches must know and understand the capabilities of their athletes. As Pedemonte (1986) states “we can take full advantage of periodization only when we know the objective basic laws of this process and when we really know the man who is in front of us” (p. 27). As all athletes are different, some may be able to sustain higher intensity workloads and recover quicker, whereas others may take longer to recover, “one cannot infer individual athletes – especially in the high-performance setting – will respond to training in the same manner” (DeWeese et al., 2013, p. 13). As such, it is important for coaches to tailor the workload to the their athletes rather than creating a general plan for all to follow.

Psychological Principles of Human Performance

In their discussion of periodization, DeWeese and colleagues (2013) mentioned the importance of psychological principles related to human performance. Mental skills training (MST) is the process by which practitioners teach athletes and coaches psychological principles. However, Holiday et al. (2012) suggest those implementing MST programs have largely neglected the concepts of periodization. Therefore, the focus of the remainder of this paper is to provide coaches with a systematic process by which to integrate mental skills training into their practices.

In order to deliver the most comprehensive training for their athletes, coaches must consider all four areas of performance: technical, tactical (strategy), physical (inc. nutritional) and mental (Wrisberg, 2007). It should be noted that this four-pronged approach is also the shared coaching philosophy of the current authors. Generally coaches regularly focus their expertise on the technical and tactical elements of their athletes’ performance. To assist with the physical part of athletes’ performance preparation expert support staff are typically utilized (e.g., strength and conditioning coaches). Unfortunately MST is rarely delivered in the same systematic and consistent manner as physical, tactical, and technical training. While some coaches undoubtedly have a strong understanding of all four elements of performance and do an excellent job of preparing athletes, it is our experience that MST is the least understood, most often overlooked, and the most intimidating for coaches to incorporate. This is certainly not meant as a criticism, but rather serves to highlight where coaches may want to develop in their craft. We also recognize that some coaches do not have access or the funds to afford a sport psychology consultant and therefore have to take on the role themselves. To assist coaches in implementing MST we will review a four-stage approach that provides any coach a viable method by which to integrate mental skills into his or her practices and competition. It is important to note that implementing MST is a long-term process requiring consistency just like any attempt to improve physical elements of performance.

Although professionals have advocated different processes by which to deliver MST (see Weinberg & Williams, 2010) the current authors propose a simple four-stage approach that includes: assessment, education, implementation and evaluation. The assessment stage should be related to the coach’s philosophy and team mission. It is important that the targeted mental skills are congruent with the coach’s values and his/her coaching philosophy. The mental skills should also be in line with the mission of the team (e.g., developing relaxation techniques for a team wanting to perform under pressure). During the assessment stage the coach should evaluate the team’s or athletes’ areas of strength and weakness. To recognize areas for improvement, coaches should thoroughly analyze the demands of their sport from a psychological perspective (i.e., which mental skills are most important for maximal performance). For example, given the independent nature of golf a team, fostering cooperation and teamwork is probably not a high priority. Instead, a college golf coach may find it more beneficial to spend time working with his or her team on how to perform under pressure by developing pre-shot routines and relaxation techniques.

During the assessment stage we suggest using different forms of assessment including interviews with players, behavioral observations, performance profiles, and valid mental skills questionnaires (e.g., Test of Performance Strategies [TOPS]; Thomas, Murphy, & Hardy, 1999). It is important that any data be gathered in a valid and reliable way so that a correct assessment may be made. While there are numerous mental skills of interest to coaches and athletes (e.g., motivation/goal-setting, confidence building, concentration, imagery, arousal/emotional regulation, communication, team cohesion, leadership, self-talk, dealing with pressure and injuries, etc.), it would clearly be difficult to address all of these skills at once. Therefore, we suggest that coaches prioritize which skills are most important by determining what aspects of performance need the most improvement.

After matching the athletes' or team's greatest area of need (e.g., lack of focus) with the appropriate mental skill (e.g., developing pre-performance routines), coaches can begin the education stage. During the education stage the coach should concentrate on teaching their athletes/teams the specific nuances of the targeted mental skill. If coaches do not have access or cannot afford a trained sport psychology consultant they must seek information through book references, blogs, or videos regarding the desired mental skill. Once they feel they have sufficient knowledge about the targeted mental skill, they can begin to teach their athletes. During this stage it is often useful for coaches to send athletes examples of high profile athletes in the popular media who talk about the mental skills to be introduced. This serves to reinforce the notion that elite athletes are incorporating these skills into their practices and that this process is important for success. Lastly, it is vital that coaches integrate the mental skill(s) slowly until the athletes get familiar with the skill and "buy-in" to MST. This means only introducing one or two mental skills to the team/athlete at a time.

Once the coach and athlete(s) are on the same page regarding the development of each mental skill, coaches should focus on implementing those skills into practice and competition. This involves the coach consistently emphasizing and reinforcing those skills during practice by referring to the previous educational session. Coaches should look to identify "teachable moments" that highlight the importance of the mental skill they are trying to teach. For example, if a basketball player consistently gets very angry, it would be appropriate for the coach to emphasize the importance of arousal regulation. However, coaches should be careful not to unnaturally manufacture these moments or look to insert the mental skill where it may not fit. Rather they should let the practices develop naturally and if the opportunity presents itself, be prepared to capitalize on the moment.

Coaches should design drills and games that allow the athletes to practice these mental skills while working on other aspects of play (technical, tactical, or physical). For example, if a soccer coach wants his/her players to cope better under pressure and control their emotions, he/she might simulate a pressure situation by playing a small-sided game while providing one team with a numerical advantage. The team with the greater number will most likely put the other team under a lot of pressure before the coach reverses the advantage to even the experience. It is important the coach connects the physical experience of the activity with the mental skills/demands by discussing what the athlete is thinking, how they are feeling, and how they might control these thoughts and emotions. The implementation stage is all about being creative in coaching practices and ensuring mental skills are integrated along with physical, technical, and tactical skills. These elements are not mutually exclusive and should be taught together.

The final stage of mental skills training involves the evaluation of the process. While evaluation should be a continual process throughout the competitive season, we advocate conducting a main evaluation at the end of the season. The purpose of this evaluation should be to examine how much the athletes have improved on the mental skills identified in the assessment stage, their perceived effectiveness of the mental skill, struggles with the mental skill, and thoughts/suggestions the athlete(s)/team has about the mental skill(s), etc. The evaluation should utilize the same tools used during the assessment phase (i.e., using the same measure – interviews, questionnaires, observations, etc.). This provides a level of consistency and helps identify progress (or lack of) in the athletes. From these evaluations coaches and players can then determine where improvements were made, possible setbacks, and what still needs to be improved. The evaluation data should be kept by the coaches for several seasons in order to track the progress of the athletes. This also serves as a form of "monitoring program" as mentioned by DeWeese et al. (2013).

Adjustments to MST programs should be made based on a comprehensive analysis of the data while recognizing that the tools used to measure mental skills have limitations. We advise all coaches to use caution when using data on mental skills to make specific coaching decisions (e.g., playing time), as mental skills are only one component of performance. In summary, using the four stages of MST (i.e., assessment, education, implementation, and evaluation) coaches can effectively teach mental skills to their athlete/team.

MST and Periodization

To implement mental skills throughout the course of a season we encourage coaches to combine the concepts of MST and periodization. In order to combine these approaches coaches must match the stage of periodization to the corresponding

MST phase. Obviously this process depends on what emphasis the coach wishes to place on each part of the season. However, as a general model, the current authors propose that coaches begin by employing the following approach, leading to subsequent alteration dependent on its suitability to the athlete(s)/teams needs and types of season. The preparation stage of periodization lends itself particularly well to the assessment and education stages of MST. As preparation emphasizes self-awareness, this is the perfect chance to use assessment tools and enlist the help of the athletes to identify what mental skills are needed for a successful season. In addition educating athletes on what to expect throughout the season regarding MST at this early stage sets up a shared understanding of the coach's mission and philosophy. The competitive/peaking stage of periodization pairs well with implementation of MST. Incorporating MST into practice and competition is the best way to cement the links between the physical and mental demands of the sport, with a consistent emphasis on both aspects leading to the "peak" of the season. For example, a tennis player practicing and evaluating her pre-shot routine during the competition phase should allow the player to develop an effective routine by the peaking phase of the season (i.e., conference tournament). The recovery stage allows coaches to step back from the pressure of competition and to evaluate the season as it winds down. Understanding and evaluating the season as a whole and which areas of MST were and were not successful, allows coaches to plan and refine their skills for the upcoming season (or even the next cycle of competition should there be multiple peaks in one season). While these pairings may not be perfect for the demands of each sport or athlete/team, they provide a general framework that would suit most MST programs.

As previously mentioned periodization involves cycles/stages of stimulation and recovery. Likewise certain mental skills are more important in some stages of the season than others. When thinking about matching specific mental skills with Wathen's (1994) stages of periodization: preparatory, competitive, peaking and recovery; coaches should choose the mental skill(s) that are most important in each stage of the season. Here are some examples of mental skills that may be important for each stage:

- Preparatory: developing athlete(s) self-awareness, team-building/team-cohesion, communication, motivation/goal-setting, leadership, confidence building, and mental toughness.
- Competitive: learning from mistakes, developing quality practice scenarios, performance preparation, concentration, communication, arousal/emotional control, dealing with pressure and injuries.
- Peaking: dealing with pressure, arousal/emotional control, quality practice, concentration, leadership, and performance preparation.
- Recovery: self-awareness, dealing with injuries/burnout, motivation/goal-setting and learning from mistakes.

As can be seen from the four stages of periodization, although there is certainly overlap some mental skills are more important and relevant to different stages of the season. While coaches would prefer their athletes to have all these mental skills at every stage of the season, MST has to be realistic and congruent with what skills are deficient and which are most needed for optimal performance at each stage of the season.

As mentioned previously coaches must be aware of how volume and intensity of MST interact with their athlete/team. While the concept of volume easily adapts from physical to mental skills (i.e., the amount of MST being performed), intensity is a little more difficult to understand. With regards to MST, training intensity refers to difficulty or complexity of the skills being taught (Holliday et al., 2012). For example, some mental skills are usually easy for athletes to grasp (e.g., self-talk), whereas other skills such as imagery may take considerable effort to master. Therefore, coaches must be aware of the volume and intensity of the mental skills they are trying to integrate and manage the mental workload of their athletes.

Conclusion

We hope coaches recognize the importance of implementing effective MST protocols with their athletes/team. We believe that coaches can do this by combining the four stages of periodization with the four stages of mental skill training (e.g., preparatory stage = conduct assessments/educate, competitive and peaking stages = implementation of the mental skill(s), recovery phase = evaluation). In order to integrate mental skills training and periodization the authors recommend

that coaches should:

- Carefully consider and develop their coaching philosophy and team mission.
- Examine their schedule, including preseason and any potential post-season competitions (regional, national tournaments, etc.) and identify where they can divide their season into the four periodization stages: preparatory, competitive, peaking and recovery.
- View MST as a long-term process requiring consistent use of the four-stage approach: assessment, education, implementation and evaluation.
- Ensure that their MST program is evidence-based, using valid and reliable data collection tools/methods.
- Consistently emphasize and reinforce mental skills during practice.
- Design their coaching sessions to incorporate all four elements of performance: physical, technical, tactical, and mental.
- Utilize all of their resources in a collaborative effort between coaches, athletes, and support staff.

Lastly, for those interested in seeking the services of a certified sport psychology consultant (CC-AASP), the authors suggest accessing the following link: <http://www.appliedsportpsych.org/certifiedconsultants/searchConsultant.cfm>. The Association of Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) and the Certified Consultant Review Committee have evaluated and approved the credentials, coursework, and consulting experiences of all those on the list.

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