Do You Need A Sport Psychologist? The Answer Is Yes If You Play Sports At Any Level

by Laura Lieff

Whether you’re an athlete or a sports fan or both you know that it takes more than physical training to be a great competitor. The mental aspect of sports is an important factor that can determine whether or not an athlete succeeds or comes up short. As a result, Sport and Performance Psychology is increasingly becoming a necessity for athletes. Whether a golfer has developed “the yips” or a baseball pitcher needs to learn to focus when he’s on the mound, sport psychologists are becoming as important to an athlete as their trainer or dietitian. In addition, “weekend warriors” are now turning to sport psychologists to enhance their own athletic results.

Performance psychology is the study and application of psychological principles of human performance to help people consistently perform in the upper range of their capabilities and more thoroughly enjoy the performance process.

It is estimated that well over 300 professional golfers regularly use sport psychologists including big names such as Padraig Harrington, Ben Crenshaw and Luke Donald. An example of an athlete who some critics have indicated could benefit from a sport psychologist is former Rockies pitcher Ubaldo Jimenez who was traded to the Indians. One sports writer commented, “Nearly eight months after being dumped by the Rockies, Jimenez still struggles to gain command of his fastball and make sense of the trade.”

Jimenez was 10-16 during his final year with the Rockies and these days he’s angry that a $200 million investment in contract extensions for former teammates Troy Tulowitzki and Carlos Gonzalez left nothing for him. Now people are wondering if Jimenez can get his mojo back.

According to Sport Psychology Consultant Dr. Jamie Shapiro, “Jimenez needs to be focusing on the necessary process to pitch rather than focusing on money and a Sport and Performance Psychologist could help him do that.”

Importance Of The Mental Game

Dr. Shapiro explains that a “performer” refers to anyone whose job requires performance whether the person is an athlete, firefighter, surgeon, coach or personal trainer; among others. Dr. Shapiro explains that the mental aspect of performance is crucial to people consistently succeeding in their job.

“In the case of sport injury many times athletes are physically ready to return to sport but they are not mentally ready which is when injury happens in many cases,” said Dr. Shapiro. “If an athlete puts in the work mentally they should see a difference in their performance. If there are two athletes who are physically equivalent the one who is stronger mentally will win.”

Dr. Shapiro is an Assistant Professor of Sport and Performance Psychology at the University of Denver’s Graduate School of Professional Psychology and was on the gymnastics team at Brown University. At DU she teaches a variety of graduate classes related to performance, counseling, coaching and team dynamics. Dr. Shapiro says that she wishes she would have had a sport psychologist during her competitive gymnastics days especially after tearing her ACL.

“It would have been helpful if I had someone to help me through the psychological challenges of recovering from such a major injury,” she explained.

Teaching Future Coaches And Consultants

As someone who brings a great deal of experience to the Sport Psychology field (she has a B.S. from Brown, an M.S. from Springfield College and an M.A. and Ph.D. from West Virginia University) Dr. Shapiro is teaching graduate students from all over the world how to work with others on the mental aspect of performance. Many of her students are former athletes and others are still competing whether it’s figure skating, triathlons or cycling. Once her students earn their M.A. in Sport and Performance Psychology, they will most likely coach or consult with other athletes.

“Coaching is the more physical and technical side of performance while consulting is the more mental and psychological side,” Dr. Shapiro said. “In addition, a good coach will also integrate the mental aspect.”

Whether they are coaching or consulting, Dr. Shapiro’s students will “teach clients the psychological skills that can help sport performance and transfer to other areas of their lives.”

Dr. Shapiro says that athletes at any level can benefit from Sport and Performance Psychology. At one time most people working with sport psychologists were higher level athletes but that is no longer the case. In fact, she says that consulting with kids at a younger age can make an enormous impact and help them later in life.

“Helping kids and instilling these mental skills when they are young athletes will help them in their athletic performance and in other areas of their lives such as school,” Dr. Shapiro explained. “Teaching them how to win and lose and focusing on stress management and setting goals is beneficial for everyone.”

Professional Lament: Golf legend Greg Norman, pictured, told David Feherty that his greatest regret is that he never utilized the services of a sport psychologist during his primary golf career.

iPerformance Can Help

Here in the Cherry Creek Valley, Dr. Mark Aoyagi, Dr. Artur Poczwardowski and Dr. Steve Portenga have opened a performance psychology practice in the Cherry Creek Valley where Dr. Shapiro is also a consultant.

iPerformance Consultants (iPC) works with performers of all levels and across all
Performance Help:
Doctors Mark Aoyagi, Jamie Shapiro, Artur Poczwardowski and Steve Portenga have opened a performance psychology practice in the Cherry Creek Valley to help athletes of all levels achieve success.

Hands-On Experience: Dr. Jamie Shapiro is an Assistant Professor of Sport and Performance Psychology at the University of Denver's Graduate School of Professional Psychology and was on the gymnastics team at Brown University.

Performance domains in developing the necessary focus, inspiration and trust in the performance process to perform at their best.

According to Dr. Aoyagi, "Sport and Performance Psychology is critical to the culture of Denver."

He continued, "The goal of iPC is to help athletes and performers from all domains (including occupations not typically thought of as performances such as business people, lawyers, surgeons, military personnel, firefighters, police officers, etc.) perform consistently in the upper range of their capability while at the same time experiencing more enjoyment, satisfaction and fulfillment."

iPC has experience at all levels of sport and performance from youth/developmental to professional and Olympic teams and individuals in a wide range of levels. Dr. Aoyagi and Dr. Portenga work with the USA track and field team and have been part of the sport psychologist staff for 10 years. They do the following for the organization: "Coaching Education" which is working with coaches who then work with the athletes and "Sport Performance Workshops" during which elite athletes meet to gain additional training with biomechanics, functional movement, nutrition and sport psychology.

USA Track and Field also requires at least one member of the sport psychology staff to travel with the team for any international competition so Dr. Portenga will be traveling with the team to the London Olympics this summer.

So whether you hope junior will be the next tennis phenom or you are trying to figure out why you triple bogeyed the last hole to miss breaking 80, a sport psychologist can help you over the hump.

For more information on iPC visit www.iperformanceconsultants.com or call 303-583-5597. To learn more about the Sport and Performance Psychology program at DU call 303-871-3736 or email gsppinfo@du.edu.