

**Research Article**

## **MENTAL EDUCATION PROGRAM TOWARD SUCCESS: THE CASE FOR STUDENT ATHLETES AND OTHER ADOLESCENTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study aimed at depicting the important picture of mental education among student athletes in their physical education courses in schools. Moreover, we proposed a mental education program for student athletes and other adolescents in order to enhance their psychological and educational skills. This program, based on the author's experiences in Iran as to a mental education program, should have these features. In fact, this program is extensible to other context such as Malaysia, one in which this study conducted.

**Keywords:** *Mental Education, Student Athlete, Adolescent*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Adolescence is an important stage in any individual's life. It is described as the period in which several coping skills and capabilities are acquired (Jones and Lavallee, 2009). Sports boost the life skills of adolescences and reduce fear of failure in young athletes. It can also facilitate positive growth in adolescents (Dowrkin and Larson, 2003). Additionally, due to the structured nature of sports, which require voluntary effort and interpersonal relationships with adults and peers, it provides them with performance and social development (Saferstein, 2006; Gould and Carson, 2008). In sports, adolescents are equipped with opportunities to develop essential behavioral and mental skills such as the ability to tolerate failure, stress management, risk taking, and perseverance (Holt *et al.*, 2012).

#### **Problems**

Young athletes like other adolescents encounter several challenges in their life span. One important factor which influences on their success is their association with their families. Parents and athletes can have cooperative relationship with each other which will have a positive effect on an athlete's psychological and general well-being.

This, in turn, induces a positive perception of the athlete. The impact of family involvement in an athlete life can be considered as negative or positive. As reported in the mass media, families are appreciated for young athletes' encouragement, the love and support they provide for the athletes, and for value dedicated to the achievements of the athletes. There are also issues regarding the negative effect families which can have an influence on psychological aspect of an athlete. The relationships between the athletes and their families in general and parents in particular have long been recognized and discussed by sports psychologists due to a key influences they have on athletes' performance and psychological development. Another factor which influence on the performance of a young athlete is the Education and educational environments.

Simultaneous aspirations in sports and education can be an obstacle for athletes, since their attention becomes deviated. Still, another group is peers and classmates, who play a vital role in student-athlete' life. The recognition of the skills and abilities required for adolescents in their life in general and their athletic life in particular has been considered of paramount importance. Jones and Lavallee (2009) asserted goal setting, self-regulation, and self-reliance as required skills. They also included the important skill such as the ability to learn from mistakes and failures, dealing with stress and injury, and boosting motivation. A well-planned mental education program provides an opportunity to improve the individual growth of young athletes and facilitates their growth in other areas of their lives (Sheard and Golby, 2006).

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### ***The Background of the Study***

Concerning learning activities, Sheard and Golby (2006) provided support for the effective role of mental skills education in the development of mental toughness for athletes. Their study involved a seven-week program for mental skills education which brought about significant increases in both self-rated mental toughness and the performance of high-performance adolescent swimmers. They suggested that mental education could increase the level of self-reported mental toughness in athletes.

### ***Mental Skills Education***

Mental education consists of the consistent practice of mental skills, leading to improved performance, gratification, and satisfaction in sports and physical activities (Weinberg and Gould, 2003).

### ***The Importance of Mental Skills Education***

Despite the physical readiness of the athletes, most athletes, coaches, and even spectators have experienced competitions in which low psychological readiness was an obstacle to the success of an athlete team. Factors such as lack of sufficient motivation and concentration, low self-confidence, stress, and anxiety inhibit an athlete's desired performance. Desired performance in sports is the result of the combination of technical and tactical abilities, physical abilities (power and speed), and psychological abilities (concentration, self-confidence, anxiety control). Most coaches hold this view that sports are at least 50% mental generally and in golf or tennis particularly, this proportion goes up to 80% or 90%. (Weinberg, 2002)

A basketball player who scores all the penalties during practicing period, yet fails in the real competition does not need physical practice and training. However, what is required is psychological skills education. David Kauss (2001), an American psychologist who has worked with his country's national Olympic team, asserts that the improvement in physical and psychological skills requires practicing the components which are important for improved performance. One needs to carry out practices for that specific part to improve a specific part or muscle of a body. Likewise, to improve any specific part of the 'inner self', specific psychological education is required (Kauss, 2001).

### ***The Efficiency of Mental Skills Education***

Introducing the mental education variables, we need a research to study the efficiency of mental skills education on the precise measurement of the mental skills. Such research, in turn, requires time and environment control. There have been many studies in the literature investigating the efficiency of mental skills education on the improvement of athletic performance. For example, Feltz and Landers (2007), Vealy (2002), Weinberg and Comar (1994) reviewed 45 related studies. Weinberg and Williams (2001) summarized these studies and concluded that 38 cases (85%) were indicative of the positive effect of mental skills education on performance. However, other studies have revealed the positive influence of mental skills education programs (Morris and Tomas, 2004).

Despite the certain/positive efficiency of mental skills education, many athletes and coaches do not pay due attention to its benefits. Factors such as lack of knowledge about education and instructional methods, belief in the inner and unchangeable nature of psychological characteristics, and lack of time are discussed as the main possible reasons. There are some myths surrounding this issue, including the idea that such education programs are for people suffering from psychological problems or they are only for high ranking athletes. Due to their lack of proper knowledge of such programs, other people expect quick improvements from mental skills education. Finally, some do not believe in the usefulness of such programs. Inspiring from the author's experiences in Iran, a mental education program should have embraced these features and, by extension, this program might be applicable to the Malaysian context, too.

### ***Mental Education for Student Athletes***

#### ***Goal Setting***

As a technique, you can use goal setting to help you realize your potential ability and putting yourself in a position to reach your ultimate goal. You can also design the short-term and mid-term objectives to reach your long-term goal. This means that goal setting is effective as it helps you to devote your energy to the short-term and mid-term objectives to develop your work plan in the long term. This step of goal setting

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is to determine the ultimate goal you would like to attain. Although you want to achieve your goals ideally, you should be realistic with a high degree of confidence in the ability to achieve the ideal. If you have selected your ultimate goal, a realistic goal would be that you are committed to achieving it and you feel motivated to work toward that goal. The first stage of goal setting is to identify the mid-term goals considered as a logical stepping stone on the path to your ultimate goal. Then, you should measure the smaller steps required for achieving the mid-term goals. This person should have experienced in your sports like an architecture that can provide useful insights for you as a designer. This expert helps you identify and build all of the lower level platforms and construct the ladders to include the important steps needed to achieve each of the platforms. Think you have never traveled abroad and have dreams of traveling to Europe in the summer after graduating from high school. You develop a plan for achieving this goal in this case. The lower level platform is that you must have enough money in order to reach the midterm goal of travelling. The next step is calling a travel agent and asking the conditions of travelling and searching on the Internet. Another mid-term goal is to earn enough money for the upcoming years. The next step is to buy plane ticket and to make the reservation. However, this stage is realized when the lower levels have been accomplished, since the lower level platforms provide key support for the mid-term objectives. How will you buy tickets if you have not earned enough money in the mid-term goals? After creating your blueprint, you can share your dreams and desires with a friend who has more experience in this case. Perhaps s/he notices that you have left out one of the important steps. Can you find the missing step? The key step to travel abroad is getting passport and visa. You have a good dream with appropriate blueprint to achieve it, but getting a passport and visa is the missing step. This example shows how important it is to have an expert friend, coach or teammate who could review your goals. And, it is necessary at each stage to review and interpret the dream to be realistic. Jot down your goals when planning them. You should write a sentence at the end of the goals. All heroes have started with failure and approached success step by step. No one is born a hero. Championship is possible through tolerating hardships and perseverance in achieving the major goal. Putting your goals in front of your eyes makes you committed to try seriously. People like your parents, friends, teammates, and coaches can support you. However, there are those who cannot support you and, instead, make fun of your goals. For example, one of the Iranian Olympians said that: When I told my friend that I would make the Iranian Olympic team at London Olympics, he laughed and made fun of me for a long time among our common friend. Again make your goals specific, measurable, realistic, and time-bound (timely).

### **Positive Self-Talk**

It is obvious that self-talk alone is not enough for being a successful athlete. You must incorporate the positive self-talk in all the other issues such as training, education, and readiness. A piece of the success puzzle can be the positive self-talk increasing the confidence. By adding positive self-talk during training and competition, even at tough times, you need to be proficient in its use. You might make even big mistakes in competitions such as scoring your own team and tell swearwords to yourself. Negative sentences are clear. I cannot believe I did this. Bringing the positive words to the mind is hard. For example: “ok, I did wrong. I have done a big mistake but now it is over. It is out of my control. Now, I should work hard and focus on the controllable thing to return to the game and score. Always remember to use these mistakes and threats as opportunities for improvement. Making a mistake means learning how to do it right the next time. We cannot go back and grieve about yesterday. You will reach the second place through passing the third one. You cannot think about the first place without standing in the second one. The third or fourth position is the step to the higher position. All those who are heroes today were in the lower steps before the championship.

### **Controlling the Things Within Your Own Control**

Mental toughness depends on the controllable things, by identifying them and the uncontrollable ones. In fact, in many situations, only a few variables affecting the output can be controlled. This means that most of these variables are beyond our control like weather, the opponent’s fans or the referee decisions. A mentally tough team or player pays attention to the controllable things and relaxes in these situations by keeping his/her energy at an appropriate level. S/he has interaction with his/her teammates to stay focused

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and ready. This reveals that you should be prepared for each unpredictable position and make it part of the race. Everything is not supposed to be based upon your desire in the race. Sometimes events occur unexpectedly. You should practice to stay focused against environmental adversity and opposition such as referee affecting your concentration by his/her decision or spectators impairing your mood to make their favorite team or player the winner. Everything would happen in the event like getting notice unduly by the referee or losing one of the best players due to injury or getting fired. I have to go back quickly and try to charge myself or my teammates. Learning to focus energy on things that are under your control is a mental skill of athletes at higher levels. You should pay close attention to the self-talk. You need to figure out your thoughts and inner speech, if your focus is on the things under your control, such as your fitness level, your game plan, and your level of effort and intensity of practice and self-talks. Or, focusing on the uncontrollable things such as sudden injury, bad weather, a disturbing call before the game, and unimaginable and exceptional game by opponents. It should be noted, however, note that if you want to control your performance to be flawless and perfect, you suffer from fear of failure.

### **Energy Management**

Have you ever noticed that in some sports, some of the excited and motivated athletes have better performance? And groups of athletes perform better when they are relaxed and calm. Which side are you in? Have you seen that changes in your energy level change daily? Some days, you feel like you are ready to race and full of energy and on other days you are tired and low energy. This sport path is not smooth. The factor making this inconsistency in the performance depends on your level of energy. Thus, the key to your best performance in a steadily state is determining the ideal energy level. At one point, your energy level can be quite low (e.g., when you go to sleep or get bored), at another, it can be high (e.g., when you have a strong emotion). If your energy level is complete, your performance will be good. However, if you are too excited or too relax, your performance will be affected accordingly. Thus, you must specify the amount of energy and learn energy management as a skill. It helps to keep your energy level in an ordered state, and keeps you in a good performance. There are signs in the environment that you can see them or think about them. You pay attention to the symptoms and they can get your energy level up and down. As your energy increases, your attentional width goes from wide to narrow. The relationship between the energy, the attentional width and the performance is based on three levels of high, right (medium), low. When your energy is low, your attentional width is wide and you pay attention to signs with bad effect on your performance. That is, instead of focusing on the important cues for your performance, you focus on cues that distract you from your performance, like paying attention to your favorite television show. On the other hand, when your energy is high, you miss some key factors to perform well. However, when your energy is right (medium), your attention is complete; you can focus on the cues related to the performance and ignore the other signs. Your goal is trying to get the right energy level. Concerning the three levels of high, right, low and how they affect your attentional width and performance, consider three different athletes. Ahmad is not so thrilled about today's game; therefore, his energy is too low with too wide attentional width. So, he pays attention to both important and unimportant cues. He has a lot of information about defensive patterns of the other team, how to play well and his role in the game. Meanwhile, Ahmad is thinking about his little brother and his exam next week. Clearly this will distract Ahmad and make him confused. So, his energy is very low. He is focused on cues in the environment that are not related to the basketball game, and so Ahmad's performance will be suffered.

Mary is a female football player- excited about her play- and has a very high energy. Her attention is narrow and close. She pays attention to the important cues associated with the play and leaves the other unrelated issues. She might give wrong passes to her teammates since her energy level, which is more than medium, makes her unable to perform at her best.

Sohrab, a soccer player, comes into play with an ideal energy level. He is excited about the game but he has great composure about his performance which gives him the ideal level of energy. He is aware of the importance of the signs. He has necessary information about the game blocking the unnecessary information. He is informed of defense patterns of the other teams. In order to play, you need to learn

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what level of energy helps you to have the best performance. So you have to be proficient in energy management techniques. This energy level is different from one person to another. Everybody does not have an energy level. Your energy level is not necessarily the same as your teammate. You may do your best when you have high-level of energy and your heart beats fast. However, your teammate may do his best when his energy is low and he is relaxed. The required energy is different among various sports. For example, championship in athletics needs a high energy level and a high level of emotion. However, golf needs low energy level. Golf player plays better with a low energy level in high pressure situations. The difference between the sports is closely related to the influence of physical abilities on the energy levels. This shows that sports that require the movement of large muscle groups such as athletics where the leg muscles are involved, high energy level is useful. Sports that require high precision, such as golf where smaller muscles are involved, low energy level is useful. Generally speaking, the activities with a high level of energy are the ones with speed, power, and using large muscle groups such as shooting, lifting weights and wrestling. But in activities such as golf, gun firing, free throw, a low level of energy is useful where smaller muscle groups are involved. How to know the efficiency level of your energy? Think about your recent good performances and identify your energy levels in the game or workout. Go a few months back when you feel good as to your sport performance. How do you feel about your attention span? Do you have enough accuracy in case of need? Do you have enough concentration on the related signs?

If your answer is yes you are in fact, identifying the competitions appropriate for your ideal energy level. We know that there is a close affinity between the energy and the performance. If you can identify your energy level that goes together with your best performance, you have identified the required energy level. Some psychologists called this level of energy “your zone of optimal functioning” or “zone” alone. Using the word “zone” is complete in its own right as it describes a state of performance where you feel like competing with another one. Many athletes describe getting in the zone means being in the moment, and being in the moment means you are not thinking about what’s happened in the past, and you’re not worried about what’s going to happen in the future.

You are reacting at an unconscious, instinctive level to what is going on around you. So, you cannot get in the zone if you have not developed your skill set to that point.

Things happen requiring a fair amount of adjustment [in competitions]. And so we are constantly pulled out of the zone. Something happens that we are not prepared for and now we have to think our way through it.

“One of the things that we were doing [with Olympic athletes] was to find out exactly the procedures that these athletes are going to have to go through before they walk out onto the track. So we can prepare them and they will know everything that’s going to happen. They won’t have any surprises that are going to cause them to be thinking about something when they are getting ready to compete.”

What we want to say that is you are able to perform without effort. You are performing at your ideal energy level. If you identify your ideal energy zone, then the next steps will be learning to identify your current level of energy and to use energy management skills and pre-performance routines like warming up or relaxing which will help you re-create the zone for competition. After identifying the energy level required performing at your best, the next step is to become aware of your current level of energy before the competition. Now, you should know where you are on the energy continuum relative to the zone so that you can determine the appropriate pre-game techniques. For example, you may use energizing techniques before every competition in the regular season. These energizing techniques are necessary because your energy level is naturally low prior to these regular season events. But, now you are in the playoffs, and due to the excitement, your energy level is higher than normal and higher than your optimal level. If this is true for all seasons, you may need to use relaxation techniques to decrease your energy to the optimal level. That is, if your energy level is high or low, increase or decrease it to reach the optimal level. Is your heart racing? Do you feel excited and antsy? If this is the case, then you are at a high level of energy. Do you feel calm and relaxed? Are you thinking of other things? If this is the case, then you are at a low level of energy. Considering this fact that we need an appropriate level of energy, in this level you need an appropriate degree of excitement so that you can put yourself in the zone where the best

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performance is achieved. Think back to those instances where you felt your energy was perfect and you performed very well. Do you remember what happened to your energy? If yes, you can re-create that energy level. Indeed, this will not always be practical. If your current energy level is lower than your zone for optimal performance, then you need energizing techniques. Energizing techniques include being physically active, cheering, imagery for being strong, and listening to music. For example, some athletes will perform warm-ups before the inception of competition by increasing energy and by elevating heart rate. Other athletes use cheering to fire themselves up prior to the event. Other athletes may use imagery which will be explained in the next sessions. It should be noted that they visualize their performance before the competition and imagine themselves full of energy and ready to go. This kind of imagery is the feeling of appropriate level of energy in the visual image of the sport performance of the athlete. So when you use imagery to energize yourself, you visualize yourself being excited and enthusiastic and ready to go. Other athletes need to listen to music for getting excited.

### **Relaxation**

As the focus is important before and during the race, and mental confusion prevents the necessary conclusions, stiff and tightened muscles prevent the appropriate conclusions and optimal performance in every sport. Have you ever tried it? For example, throwing the ball to the hoop in basketball requires focus and relaxed muscle before shooting. Stiff and tense muscles impede complex movements. Let's try to see who has tense muscles or relaxed ones. Now, practice two by two. You stand and the other one raises your hands and drops it. If you see that your hands move downward easily and there is no stiffness in them, you have relaxed muscles of the arm or shoulder. However, if it does not move easily, you will not have relaxed muscles relative to the absence of comfort. When you have tense muscles, you need more energy to do the moving relative to the time your muscles are calm. So, practice to manage and save energy in long lasting competitions.

When you have mastered the breathing in exercises, at rest and even during stressful situation, it can help you relax. So, now breathe in and out slowly via nose. Repeat the breathing several times without make it deep. Empty your breast of air by two moves. Slowly tighten your hands while sitting. I count 10 numbers and you gradually tighten your fist within the 10 numbers and move it upward to the upper arm. You will drop them when I point.

The most important issue is to understand whether or not your body is relaxed. Stressful conditions are when a soccer team scored a goal or two back from the opponent's or a wrestler falls back to 2 points from his rival due to a move.

Now, he is full of anxiety since there is less and less time to catch up. When we practice relaxation in calm situations, we get ready for practicing relaxation in calm situations. Now, one of your exercises is relaxing your muscles before, during the game, especially in stressful situations, and after the game for mental and physical recovery. When you loosen your muscles, your anxiety will be decreased. So, relaxed muscles can enhance your concentration. Anxiety will tighten the muscles. Usually fears, tend to do things perfectly, doubting your ability and uncertainty about it increase the anxiety.

### **Visual Imagery**

Imagery is a technique utilized by elite athletes on regular bases. Athletes may use imagery as an energy management technique in order to calm themselves and to help them sleep, to practice performing sport skills, to prepare for performance in unfamiliar settings. It is obvious that almost all elite athletes use imagery as a part of their readiness for competition. Many elite athletes have said they have had vivid dream of their performance.

This shows that some kinds of imagery will help the performance. Imagery can also be used as a relaxation method to manage the energy before the competition. This method can be very useful for going to sleep at the night of an important competition. Most of the techniques will be combined with slow breathing. Imagery is enhanced when you are in a comfortable position, slow your breathing, incorporate all of your senses, and make the imagery as vivid as possible. The peace of mind sends dispersion away. The next step is to focus on your breathing. Slow breathing and relaxed body can make you ready for mental imagery. Some will find some solace in seeing the sea, the forest or the mountain.

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Athletes also use imagery to help them practice performing the skills of their sport along with using it to be calm. When you imagine yourself performing, the body responds as if you were actually performing the behavior. Therefore, you can actually practice 10 times but you can repeat that movement 100 times in your mind.

You should make the imagery as realistic as possible. You should feel the smells, sounds or lights. You should visualize the sounds of the spectators, the serious face of the referee and the other environmental matters. This step is critical because whatever you see yourself doing in your mind's eye will begin to become automatic. Focus on those things in your mind that you focus on in the time of performing well in sports skills. Use the same words that you use in your self-talk during physical activity. You should practice every day, whenever you are free. In fact, combining real training and mental training increases your skills. Training a skill in mind can help you to perform, make you more skilled and automate the movements.

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