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Forward

Dr. Patrick J. Cohn, President of Peak Performance Sports of Orlando, Florida, earned his Ph.D. in Education specializing in sports psychology from the University of Virginia in 1991, and founded Peak Performance Sports in 1994. Dr. Cohn is an author, professional speaker and one of the nation's leading mental game coaches. His coaching programs instill confidence, composure and effective mental strategies that enable athletes and teams to reach their performance goals.

Dr. Cohn has helped athletes from a variety of sports backgrounds (both amateurs and professionals) identify and develop the mindset needed to achieve peak performance. World-class golfers, runners, shooters and auto racers, as well as motocross, tennis, baseball, softball, football and hockey players, are among those who have benefited from his mental game coaching and training.

As a leading authority on developing mental skills and pre-performance routines, Dr. Cohn has built a proven training system based on extensive experience as an athlete, a mental coach to athletes and a sports psychology researcher. In addition, he has written a number of sports books, including *Going Low*, *The Mental Game of Golf*, *The Mental Art of Putting* and *Peak Performance Golf*.

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When is Sports Psychology Useful? By Patrick J. Cohn, Ph.D.

Introduction

Many athletes and coaches are confused about the role of sports psychology in improving athletic performance. Sports psychology is part of the larger field of sport science and studies human behavior in the sport environment and the benefits of mental training on enhancing sports performance. The goal of sports psychology is to help athletes and teams perform their best by improving the necessary mental skills to excel in a sporting endeavor. Sports Psychology is not about working with problem athletes or abnormal behavior.

Mental training or mental game coaching is the segment of sports psychology that concentrates specifically on coaching athletes on how to break through the mental barriers that keep them from performing up to their peak potential and by teaching mental skills for success. By focusing on the mental strategies needed to be successful in any competition, mental game coaching seeks to achieve the overall goal of performance improvement and enhancing consistency in performance.

I prefer to use the tile "mental game coach" because I think athletes can relate to this title better than "sports psychologist," as mental game coaching is another facet of performance enhancement. I make sure my students understand that I am not trained in traditional "psychopathology" nor have a

license to practice psychology. My professional background is in education, physical education, sports, and sports psychology. My experience also comes from the sports world as a former athlete, coach, and for the last 15 years, as a mental game coach to athletes.

Unfortunately, for mental coaches, the field of "psychology" still carries a negative stigma because many people perceive sports psychology as dealing with abnormal individuals or problem athletes. However, this is not what I do in sports psychology. My role is to help athletes develop mental skills for success in sports only. I work with normal people who are under additional perceived pressures to perform in their sport. My goals are to teach athletes how to be more confident, focus better, stay composed under pressure, practice more efficiently, and develop more effective pregame routines. I become an extension of the athlete's support team.

Unlike a psychotherapist or psychologist, I do not use couches, prescribe medicines, or work with abnormal behavior. The main difference between a mental game coach and a psychotherapist is that a mental game coaches work with athletes on sports performance enhancement and not personal challenges (such as divorce, grief counseling) or abnormal behavior.

Another myth that most athletes maintain is the view that mental and physical aspects of sport are separate. Some athletes falsely belief that you must first master "perfect" technique or mechanics before you can work on attitude, mindset, or mental skills. My philosophy is that you cannot separate the

mental from the physical when it comes to performance. Decisions, thoughts, images, and feelings drive motor behavior. Sports psychology helps athletes develop confidence and focusing skills in conjunction with the mastery of the technical aspects of sport.

How do you know when you need or could benefit from sports psychology? I start by asking some important questions. Are you performing up to the ability you have shown? Do you perform as well in competition as you do in practice or qualifying? I am sure you know some fellow athletes who have been labeled with "great talent" or physical skills, but have not performed up to their full potential. This is a primary sign that one's mindset may be getting in the way of performance. Here are some other questions to consider:

- Are you so self-conscious that you worry about what others think about your performance?
- Do you have any doubts about your sport before or during competition?
- Do you get so anxious that you don't have a calm mind or think straight in competition?
- Are you motivated by a fear of failure and does this affects your performance in competition?
- Do you get distracted easily by things that go on around you in your environment?
- Do you become easily frustrated when things do not go according to plan?

When is Mental Training Needed?

There are several indicators that sports psychology or mental coaching can help you rise above mental challenges and get more out of your talent. Below is a partial list of the common signals that a mental barrier is holding you back from peak performance.

You perform much better in practice than during competition. Your practice game is flawless, but in competition, your performance is below par. You feel confident and loose in practice and then are plagued with doubt or indecision in the competitive arena. Something changes between practice and competition, but you just cannot put your finger on what it is. Usually fear of failure or tension holds you back.

You have too many perfectionistic qualities. Many athletes think that when they are successful, perfectionism is the reason why. Yes, there are some advantages to perfectionism such as high motivation and being goal-oriented. However, many perfectionistic characteristics hold athletes back from success, such as holding onto high, unrealistic expectations, being overly critical of self, trying too hard, and getting easily frustrated.

You don't perform well when others are watching you. When others who you care about, (such as parents, fans, coaches) watch you perform, you become too self-conscious of their presence and lose your focus on the task. Often you may even worry about letting others down or failing in front of others, similar to stage fright or fear of embarrassment. Most likely you are

afraid to embarrass yourself in front of others who are watching you perform because you fear how your performance might reflect on you as an athlete or a person.

You maintain doubt about your sport before or during games. You perform with a lot of confidence in practice and gain confidence from practice, but when you play your sport for real, you start to entertain doubts about your ability to get the job done. I call this "competitive self-confidence" as opposed to "practice self-confidence." You start to think, "Can I really beat this person across the net?" "Do I have what it takes to strike out this batter?" Doubts can be disguised subtly in the form of a simple question. When you question your ability to perform, it is really doubt in disguise. In the absence of confidence, you have doubt. When you have doubts, confidence suffers.

You feel anxious or scared when you perform in competition. You perform freely and loose in practice and do not have many worries, but in games, you are paralyzed by fear and anxiety. Most often, athletes with a fear of failure get tight and anxious in games because they want to win so badly or have are afraid of embarrassment. Fear of failure causes you to try too hard and worry too much about outcomes.

You limit your performance with strict expectations. With large amounts of practice and success in competition, comes both confidence and higher expectations. Confidence is what you want to let ride, but maintaining strict expectations equates to pressure, judgments, and demands you place on

yourself. I spend a lot of time with my students helping them identify limiting expectations and parking them in the locker room or parking lot prior to performance. I'll talk more about this later in this booklet.

You attach your self-worth to your ability to perform. Some athletes are driven to compete because of the rewards that come from being successful: fame, accolades, and respect. You have a desire to get your name in the paper, get praise from others, or rewards from your parents. These motivators, although help you feel better about yourself as a person, are not the best type of motivators. When you are doing well in sports, it's easy for you to feel good about yourself, but when not performing well, it's harder to feel good about yourself, as you attach your level of success to self-worth.

You lose focus during crunch-time. When up to bat with the bases loaded, two outs and the game tied, you have trouble thinking clearly because of the pressure to produce for your coach, teammates, or fans. You forget the count or don't pay attention to the sign from the coach. You commit simple mental errors that you wouldn't normally do in other less threatening situations because you are unable to clear your mind and focus on the task.

After an injury, you are physically 100% recovered, but you can't perform the way you did pre-injury. Many athletes who have sustained a major sports injury have trouble regaining their confidence post-injury. Even after the doctor gives you a clean bill of health, your mental scars have not healed. You may be afraid of re-injury and this causes you to play tentatively.

Alternatively, you may have lost your confidence and wonder if you can return to previous performance levels pre-injury.

You have a burning desire to get better. You may not have an identifiable mental challenge or mental block in your sport, but you want to improve your mental game and win more. You think mental game coaching or mental training can help you improve and get to the next level. You want to do everything you can to get the edge over your competition, including the mental edge. At Peak Performance Sports, we help you get the mental edge.

As stated previously, some people still think that sports psychology, because of the association of psychology that we work with abnormal athletes. For this reason, most athletes resist working with a sports psychologist or mental coach because of the fear others will label them as a "head case." Even today, professional athletes I work with do not want the public to know they are working with a mental game coach. I certainly respect their concern for confidentiality, but it tells me that some athletes still think working with an expert in sports psychology should not be made public mostly because they do not understand what sports psychology is really about or are afraid of how the public views it.

Most athletes seek out my services because of a particular performance barrier, slump, plateau, or decrease in performance. As a mental game coach, I often become the last resort after athletes have tried several other means to get beyond performance slumps. I wish this were not the case. Most athletes

wait until they get into a slump or something needs to be "fixed" and they have exhausted all other resources before they commit to working on their mental game.

Only a limited number of athletes seek my services because they want to improve mental toughness (with no apparent mental block) and improve performance. I find that coaches are more likely to bring in a mental coach to give the team every chance of being successful from the start of the season or pre-season. The real goal is to help a team identify barriers to teamwork and enhance performance by improving mental skills for success.

The real value of sports psychology is helping athletes reach their physical potential and perform more often in the zone. My work is not always about helping athlete get over mental blocks in performance. My goal when working with students is to develop a mindset for success so they can get the most out of their physical ability every time they step onto the field, court, track, or course.

How Can Athletes Benefit From Mental Game Coaching?

Sports Psychology is about improving your attitude and mental game skills to help you perform your best by identifying limiting beliefs and embracing a healthier philosophy about your sport. Below is a list of the top ten ways that you can benefit from sports psychology:

- **1. Improve focus and deal with distractions**. Many athletes have the ability to concentrate, but often their focus is displaced on the wrong areas such as when a batter thinks "I need to get a hit" while in the batter's box, which is a result-oriented focus. Much of my instruction on focus deals with helping athlete to stay focused in the present moment and let go of results.
- **2. Grow confidence in athletes who have doubts**. Doubt is the opposite of confidence. If you maintain many doubts prior to or during your performance, this indicates low self-confidence or at least you are sabotaging what confidence you had at the start of the competition. Confidence is what I call a core mental game skill because of its importance and relationship to other mental skills.
- **3. Develop coping skills to deal with setbacks and errors.** Emotional control is a prerequisite to getting into the zone. Athletes with very high and strict expectations, have trouble dealing with minor errors that are a natural part of sports. It's important to address these expectations and also help

athletes stay composed under pressure and when they commit errors or become frustrated.

- **4. Find the right zone of intensity for your sport**. I use intensity in a broad sense to identify the level of intensity or activation that is necessary for each person to perform his or her best. This will vary from person to person and from sport to sport. Feeling "up" and positively charged is critical, but not getting overly excited is also important. You have to find the balance between being excited to complete, yet not getting over-excited or anxious.
- **5. Help teams develop communication skills and cohesion**. A major part of sports psychology and mental training is helping teams improve cohesion and communication. The more a team works as a unit, the better the results for all involved.
- **6. To instill a healthy belief system and identify irrational thoughts**. One of the areas I pride myself on is helping athlete identify ineffective beliefs and attitudes such as comfort zones and negative self-labels (i.e. "I'm a loser") that hold them back from performing well. These unhealthy beliefs must be identified and replaced with a new way of thinking. Unhealthy or irrational beliefs will keep you stuck no matter how much you practice or hard you try.
- **7.** Improve or balance motivation for optimal performance. It's important to look at your level of motivation and just why you are motivated to play your sport. Some motivators are better in the long-term than others.

Athletes who are extrinsically or externally motivated often play for the wrong reasons, such as the athlete who only participates in sports because of a a parent's desire. I work with athlete to help them adopt a healthy level of motivation and be motivated for the right reasons.

- **8. Develop confidence post-injury**. Some athletes find themselves fully prepared physically to get back into competition and practice, but mentally some scars remain. Injury can hurt confidence, generate doubt during competition, and cause a lack of focus. I help athletes mentally heal from injuries and deal with the fear of re-injury.
- **9. To develop game-specific strategies and game plans**. All great coaches employ game plans, race strategies, and course management skills to help athletes mentally prepare for competition. This is an area beyond developing basic mental skills in which a mental coach helps athletes and teams. This is very important in sports such as golf, racing, and many team sports.
- **10. To identify and enter the** "**zone**" **more often**. This incorporates everything I do in the mental side of sports. The overall aim is to help athletes enter the zone by developing foundational mental skills that can help athletes enter the zone more frequently. It's impossible to play in the zone everyday, but you can set the conditions for it to happen more often.

Sport psychology may not be appropriate for every athlete. Not every person wants to "improve performance." Sport psychology is probably not for recreational athletes who participate for the social component and to have a fun weekend. Moreover, if you do not spend time improving fitness or working with a coach, most likely you will not adhere to a mental coaching program.

Young athletes whose parents force them to see a sports psychologist are not good candidates either when the child does not understand or see the utility in mental game coaching. It is very important that an athlete understand the importance of mental coaching and desires to improve his or her mental game without the motivation to satisfy a parent. Similarly, an athlete who sees a mental game expert only to satisfy a coach will not apply mental training.

Sports Psychology does apply to a wide variety of serious athletes. Most of my students (junior, high school, college, and professional athletes) are highly committed to excellence and seeing how far they can go in sports. They love competition and testing themselves against the best in their sport. They understand the importance of a positive attitude and mental toughness. These athletes want every possible advantage they can get including the mental edge over the competition.

How Does Mental Game Coaching Work?

The first step in mental coaching is to identify your mental game strengths and weaknesses. I first send my students an AMAP or Athlete's Mental Aptitude Profile. This serves as a guideline and helps you think about the

right questions. When we first meet in person or talk over the phone, I ask you more questions about your mindset and beliefs based on your AMAP so we can develop a complete picture of your mental game.

The next phase is to develop a mental game plan, which guides the work we do together. The mental game plan outlines what we need to improve and includes some basic mental game skills I teach all my students such as how to focus on the process and identify self-limiting expectations. Once the mental game plan is developed, we would begin our work on mental skills that apply to your specific challenges. I present a mental game program that is customized to your needs, but I do include a few foundation mental skills for all of my students.

Below is an example of how I would start my work with an athlete. I begin with a specific action statement and then summarize the key strategies we need to apply to your sport. Here is an example of how I would work on with a Bowler:

1. Dr. Cohn's Formula: Identify expectations and replace with manageable objectives and high self-confidence.

- Identify self-liming expectations such as what you think is a good score for a game and other outcome expectations (number of strikes, spares, etc. you should get).
- Replace expectations with manageable objectives such as focusing on one shot at a time and setting objectives around execution in

- the present moment. Example: Committing to the plan for each shot prior to execution.
- Confidence is not an expectation. Confidence is belief in your ability without judgment of how you are doing (based on expectations).
 Here we would discuss the differences between confidence, expectations, and goals or objective.

Once you grasp the basic concepts and skills, the application phase of mental coaching starts. This is where I help you apply what you learned in the sessions to your sport performance. We apply your mental skills to practice, preshot or preperformance preparation, warm-up routines, and post-performance assessments. I often go with you to your sport environment and help you integrate mental skills into your regular practice and performance routines.

Finally, the follow up phase of coaching helps you apply what you have learned on a consistent basis. I have found that the best results come from a long-term application of mental training, as you need to apply the information, day after day, week and week. The best option is to be followed over several months. In fact, I structure all my programs this way. I help my students stay committed to a positive mindset and attitude until good thinking become second nature and the dominant habit.

What is the Next Step?

The next step is to decide if mental coaching is right for you and what mental coaching program best suit your needs. I offer several "levels" of programs that I custom tailored to your individual or team needs. Here are the options:

- 1. One-on-one coaching in Orlando with follow up.
- 2. One-on-one phone coaching from anywhere in the world.
- 3. Virtual coaching as a premium member of our online mental training system (www.peaksportsnetwork.com).
- 4. Mental toughness programs for teams (<u>www.peaksports.com</u>).

Contact Information:

For more information about sports psychology or mental coaching, email Dr. Cohn at Peaksports.com, call 888-742-7225, or visit our website at: http://www.peaksports.com. Peak Performance Sports offers a variety of mental game programs including one-on-one programs in Orlando, virtual or phone coaching with athletes from anywhere in the world, group teleclasses, and mental game assessments. For more information, visit www.peaksports.com and click on "Programs & Seminars."

To become a member of our online mental training system, visit: www.PeaksportsNetwork.com

About Dr. Patrick Cohn

Dr. Patrick J. Cohn, President and Founder of Peak Performance Sports, LLC of Orlando, Florida, is an author, professional speaker, and the nation's leading sports psychology authority. His mental coaching programs instill confidence, composure, and develop mindsets that enable athletes and teams to reach peak performance. Dr. Cohn has helped amateur and professional athletes and teams from a variety of sports cultivate mindsets needed to achieve peak performance. World-class golfers, runners, shooters and auto racers, as well as motocross, tennis, baseball, softball, football and hockey players, are among those who have benefited from his mental game coaching expertise. As a leading authority on mental training for peak performance, Dr. Cohn has developed his performance boosting training system based on extensive experience as an athlete, a mental coach to pro athletes and sports psychology research. In addition, he has written a number of sports psychology books and operates the world's most comprehensive online mental training system at peaksportsnetwork.com.

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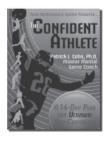
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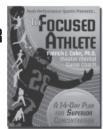
•Diane Wade, Equestrian

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