

The Quest for Gold: Applied Psychological Skills Training in the 1996 Olympic Games

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Abstract

In this article, Colleen Hacker shares some principles, techniques, and a brief history of the psychological skills training program she used consistently and successfully with the United States women's national soccer team. The content is adapted from a keynote presentation she delivered to the Canadian Soccer Coaches' symposium. At the time of this presentation the team she was working with had won a Gold Medal in the 1996 Olympic Games and was preparing for the 1999 World Cup which they ultimately won.

Introduction

While many of my comments are specifically related to what has been designed and implemented with the most elite players in the world today, every one of these principles could be utilized in a variety of sport settings whether you're a coach of youth players, a club coach or an intercollegiate coach. And, certainly, these techniques have application to sports other than soccer. The point is that the same principles utilized for psychological skills training that we use with the national team can be implemented across ages, in most sport settings, and for both genders.

Let me set the stage for what I'm doing, how I got here, and what my role with the team is. I have been a member of the national coaching staff in the United States since 1994, and through my association with the national coaching staff, met and began working with then head coach, Tony

DiCicco who was the World Cup and Olympic coach for the United States. He asked me to join the team in the spring of '95 and I have been working with the team ever since. To understand the situation that I came into - those of you who know your soccer history - at least on the women's side of the game - know that the team won the first women's World Cup in 1991, and then were defeated in the semi finals in the 95 World Championships by Norway. That moment was a crystallizing event in the lives of the players and staff and in the national team program in terms of focus, and perspective, and issues to be addressed in the future.

To understand the psychological skills training program (PST) that we implemented, what was done and why, I think it's helpful to understand a little bit of the history of this team (through a team highlight video that included the following script).

Video

I have a dream.
I have a dream.
I have a dream.
I have a dream.
I have a dream.
A dream of playing soccer.

For me personally it's my life. It's my life to be part of this team, I don't want to be doing anything else. I want soccer to become something that's just rooted in America.

Mia Hamm

The dream begins

What stood out for me was first of all Michelle scoring the winning goal, obviously her second goal. I mean it seemed like it took forever for the ball to get into the net. It was such a great feeling, I'm getting goose bumps right now thinking about.

Carla Overbeck

The wake-up call

We played Norway in the semi finals and lost. Stepping off that field we didn't feel we gave everything that we had. We didn't prepare as well as we could of.

Mia Hamm

That's when the whole team changed and turned around. It was like every day after that either we talked about that game, or you remembered that game, it was something that was in the back of your mind. It was like someone had etched it in your brain. And that was the feeling we wanted, "Let's never let this happen again.

Julie Foudy

We're going to remember this day and we're going to come out after people.

Carla Overbeck

The gold

To win the gold medal in just the way we did it, and in front of all these people, I just didn't know what to do with myself. I mean all the energy of all my lifetime in sport just came to a head, and I just ran. I had all this energy. And I would have ran all night if I could.

Brianna Scurry

Sixteen of us standing on the podium together, singing the national anthem. And I can remember we all started off kind of slowly saying it, halfway through we were kind of screaming, and by the end we were like shouting the national anthem together.

Julie Foudy

The dream

To win the first World Cup in 1991 and then to be dethroned in 1995 and comeback, to find the resources to train as hard as they did to win the first gold medal is just a testament to their legacy in women's soccer and women's athletics.

Coach Tony DiCicco

The future of women's soccer looks great. In 1999 the women's World Cup will come to the United States and we expect the World Cup tournament to do for women what the World Cup did for men in 1994. It's an international event with pageantry and color and anyone that comes will see the best women's soccer players from all over the world.

Donna deVarona

We are going to set the standard for what women's sporting events will look like in the future. We're going to play in major stadiums, in major markets, were going to have major corporate sponsors and licensees.

Marla Messing

The United States has made the biggest commitment of any country in the world to this event.

Tony DiCicco

I hope it'll be similar to the Olympics. That was just an experience that I never thought I would ever feel again and now I have a chance.

Tisha Venturina

I have a dream. I have a dream. A dream. A dream of playing soccer. A dream of playing for my country. My country. A dream of winning the 1999 women's World Cup. Be a part of my dream.

(end of video)

You can see that nothing great is accomplished without first having a dream. At the moment, we are less than two months away from moving into a residency program in Orlando, Florida which is where we trained prior to the summer Games in Atlanta. This team now has the challenge of shaping their own dreams into reality. Let me tell you about the demographic differences among our players because I think this is something that most people don't understand. The current team is comprised of athletes who range in age range from 16 to 17 years old to 31 or 32. Obviously there are maturational and developmental changes in that 15 year age span that occur for individuals. There are two mothers on the team, a third of the players are married, some have graduated from college a decade ago and others are inter-collegiate performers at present. It's a diverse group in every respect. That being said, our challenge remains steadfast; to develop a cohesive unit and to maintain the integrity and authenticity of each athlete and the team as a whole.

The Psychological Skills Training Program

Just like physical skills, psychological skills can be identified; they can be trained and they can be improved with practice. We are, in fact, able to make a difference. There is no question that to be able to achieve what this team has done, virtually every single area of their training protocol has been carefully cultivated and analyzed. From the nutritionist and strength and conditioning coach to tactical coaches and scouts - every possible part of the game is addressed. Psychological skills training is one important piece of the performance puzzle.

Winning the gold medal in 1996 certainly was a peak experience for all of us, and I credit much of that to the coaching staff: assistant coaches - Lauren Gregg and April Heinrichs, and head coach - Tony DiCicco. The support that they have given me, and the support that they have given to the psychological training of athletes is probably without parallel. They have been 100 percent supportive.

We have talked for years in the soccer community about the **Four Pillars of Soccer:**

- 1) technical**
- 2) tactical**
- 3) physical**
- 4) psychological.**

But if you look at what teams do, and you look at the training techniques that teams follow, it's almost as if it were a three-legged stool. There's a tremendous amount of tactical analysis, a tremendous amount of technical improvement and expertise, and a firm commitment to physiological preparation. And, almost like an afterthought, there's brief discussion concerning the psychological dimension of sport. Often, mental skills are treated with this after-the-fact attitude. We want to make sure that for any

player, regardless of the level, you realize that there are four pillars to successful soccer. Certainly the psychological dimension is one. Sport psychology or mental skills training might even be **the** critical advantage.

When I first addressed the team, and coaching staff, I said to them, “From a coaching standpoint you’d probably like to think that what you’re doing has 90 to 99 percent of the total effect on your teams’ performance, especially if they’re winning”. Certainly the coaching staff takes the lions’ share of the responsibility and makes a critical contribution in the competitive cauldron. But I then said, “If I was able to offer, in concert with your hard work, a 3-5 percent boost in performance, or even a 5 percent improvement with just one player, might not this be the margin of victory? And if it happened with two players...?” So even if we use the smallest possible contribution, you can see how important psychological skills become to performance and ultimately to game outcome. And the more important the games, and the more critical the mission of the team, the more the psychological dimension can make the essential difference. I have always enjoyed the Yogi Bera quote in response to being asked about the importance of the mental side of baseball. Not a mathematician, Yogi Bera said, “Sport is 90 percent mental and 50 percent physical”. You may question his mathematical acumen but not his assessment on the importance of sport psychology. It is tremendously important, even if we can make only the smallest of differences.

Peak Performance

- Athletic ability and technical skills account for approximately 65%.
- Coaches increase that capability to 85%.
- Strength training, nutrition, trainers and physicians add another 10%.
- Sport psychology and mental skills account for a critical 5% of Peak Performance.

The Coach as an Educational Sport Psychologist

What are psychological skills? Why are they important? What are we trying to accomplish with the kinds of things that we are doing with the athletes? I want to preface any further comments that I have by complimenting a colleague that I have sadly never met, but someone that you will be hearing from during the course of this symposium, and that's Dr. Terry Orlick. When I was first asked to serve as the sport psychology consultant with the soccer team, the first thing I did, (which is what I do in any important undertaking) is scour the professional literature. I read everything I could get my hands on that dealt with psychological skills training for Olympic athletes, for world champions, and limited my analysis to what I considered the best quality sources. I will tell you proudly that Terry Orlick’s work has proved to be the most helpful, the most practical and the most applicable of any that I have found. You will see much of his influence throughout my work.

When Olympic athletes were asked what are the most critical elements to success, it was interesting to note that ‘psychological issues’ rated as the top five or six of the top 10 reasons given. The two primary goals of PST that I shared with our team, and what I would challenge each of you to adopt is - to increase or maintain an athletes intrinsic motivation (that they want to train, that they want the challenge, that they want to come back from failure, that they want to achieve success) and to increase or maintain an athlete’s self-control and individual responsibility. So intrinsic motivation, (a ‘want-to’ rather than a ‘have-to’) and an ability to set goals, to establish game plans, to commit to

the kinds of things that they can control. **Those two attributes, intrinsic motivation and self-control are our keys.**

People talk about the apparent dichotomy between physical skills and psychological skills. What I want to say to you is: let's look at this as a marriage, one compliments the other and, at the core, are inseparable. Physical skills and psychological skills are improved by the same techniques; practice, repetition, and attention to detail. It's not a dichotomy, it's a holistic approach. Athletes are people first and we need to address and cultivate the variables that impact on them as human beings not just as gifted performers.

Why is so little time spent on psychological skills training? The number one reason that coaches give is: Time. "Time! I don't have enough time". Well, that may be true, but most of the work that I do is with the athletes on the field, in their training environment. It's not separate from or an add-on kind of endeavor. I encourage coaches to make PST part of the regular training and competitive atmosphere. Rather than conduct a meeting on psychological skills at the beginning of the season, do it throughout the year - in training, after training, before training. Make it part of what you're doing. The second reason why people say they don't implement a PST program is that they don't know how. Part of what you're doing today is aimed at increasing your own knowledge and your own awareness. You, as coaches, can learn these skills and improve your own confidence and expertise in this area.

What are some specific techniques important to a PST program? What performance areas can you impact? The answer includes a wide range of concepts and skills but basically, I would characterize an essential list including the following aspects:

Arousal control. We implemented various forms of progressive relaxation and breathing techniques as well as energizing strategies.

Goal setting. We developed a goal setting program for individual players, for small groups (for example, what are the goals for the midfielders? For the goal keepers?) and for the team as a whole.

Imagery. was a centerpiece for us. It was something that the athletes were committed to utilizing and improving. We developed imagery audio tapes. These cassette tapes were each individually designed. They weren't mass produced but specifically designed for each of the players on particular topics.

Attention control. In the course of a 90 minute game, attention can and does waiver. You know when you're really tuned in and you've got that vision that is both wide to take in everything, but is also a razor sharp, tunnel vision. A player's attention needs to be appropriate for the task at hand and flexible throughout the match.

Sleep issues. We developed audio tapes for athletes to be able to go to sleep. Can you imagine the tension and the excitement that accompanies the first Olympic Games?

Self-confidence. If there's one area that coaches talked to me about the most, it's individual and team confidence. They say 'Gee, I've got this great player but she's just not confident'. Or 'Wow, one game he's on fire, and the next game he's timid'. Coaches realize that self-confidence is vital to peak performance.

Self-talk patterns. Very few athletes, and coaches for that matter, understand how negative their own self talk is. What they're often focusing on is what they can't do, or

on errors or mistakes that they've made. We teach athletes to note their internal dialogue and bring it under productive and volitional control.

Interpersonal relationship and communication issues are omnipresent especially if you're dealing with a residency situation. We're together 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Each person has a different style, a different pattern of communication and different individual needs. Conflict resolution, communication skills, and diversity issues of all kinds are key areas of focus for our team.

Performance routine and analysis. Each and every athlete and coach is going to experience a pregame time period. With that fact, there's going to be pregame thoughts. There's going to be pregame images. There's going to be pregame behaviors. The question is - are you going to control them or are they going to control you?

Dealing with injuries and illness (chronic and acute). A well known example of chronic illness on our team is that of Michelle Akers - her story is known around the world - she's battling chronic fatigue syndrome along with the cumulative effects of over a dozen surgeries to her knee and shoulder. And her battles are real battles. We also had an acute situation in the Olympics with Mia Hamm arguably one of the best players, if not the best player in the world. She sustained a very severe ankle sprain in the middle of the Olympic Games. So we are concerned with not only the initial trauma but also recovery. We also have concerns about the effects on players who aren't injured. How are they dealing with the potential loss of a star player?

Preparing for major competitions – how do we prepare for major competitions?

Orlick's Elements of Success

- Total commitment
- Quality practice rather than quantity of practice
- Clearly defined goals
- Positive imagery on a daily basis
- Focusing totally on one play, one shift, one move at a time
- Recognizing, expecting and preparing to cope with pressure situations
- Practice and competition plans
- Distraction control strategies
- Postgame evaluation – Drawing out the lessons and acting on them
- A clear understanding of what helps you play well vs. play poorly

Terry Orlick and Jean Williams at the University of Arizona, among others, have specifically outlined qualities that they have found characterize successful athletes. Whether you're dealing with a ten-year-old, or a 50-year-old, these qualities are critical for success, regardless of the level, gender, or type of competition.

Also there's no question that daily rigors play a significant role in athletic performance. Day after day, after day, athletes are, in essence, following the same routine. They get up, they go to the training room, get their medical needs taken care of, they train, they eat, they come back and they train again. They have dinner and now it's fitness time or a scheduled team meeting. There's a great deal of repetition. What is your attitude? How do you handle that? Do you make excuses? Do you settle for good enough? One of the ways in which we challenge our athletes is to ask, 'Is good enough to get by, good enough?'. How hard are you willing to push yourself? Much of their training has to take place away from the coaching environment. Can you find another performer, another athlete or a

teammate, to work with you and constantly push the standards of excellence?

Overview of the program

We try to emphasize that psychological skills are just like physical skills. You need to identify what your strengths are and build on those. No one is more aware than athletes themselves where deficiencies might be, or where they might get tripped up. The familiar adage, “Know thyself”, is the starting place.

Another point to emphasize is that PST for our team is completely voluntary. There is no time where athletes are required or forced to meet with me, or attend individual meetings. In fact, the very first meeting that I offered as the sport psychologist prior to the Olympics was completely voluntary. I announced that, “I’m going to be talking about imagery today. Any athletes that want to come, show up at such and such a time”. Eleven of 16 athletes came. I thought it was revealing that nine of those 11 were starters. It was another case of the rich getting richer. They understood the importance of PST, the narrow margin of victory that mental skills training can provide, and they’re milking it for everything possible.

Another area of focus is on self-awareness and self-control. We practice these techniques daily, not as add-ons and not separate from practice and competitive environments.

When I’m traveling with the team or on-site at a training camp, time-wise a majority of my time is spent in individual meetings. There’s not a canned program. It’s not like this is the Colleen Hacker method. For each athlete I’m working on different issues and I use different techniques. It is unique, specialized and tailored to that athlete. At least once or twice a week I will have team meetings on a particular issue. It might be

self-confidence, it might be on concentration, or on developing a pregame routine, or it might be on composure under pressure, or on healing, rehabilitation and coming back from injury. In these topical meetings the whole team is in attendance. I am a great believer in the adage, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”. There are no ‘have to’s’. We don’t want to tamper with success. But, we do want athletes to feel comfortable to come and talk, and deal with issues, when the need arises.

A lot of times people say, “Gee, why do athletes need this? Is there something wrong with them? Are they “head cases”? Or is PST for problem athletes?” I’d say it’s analogous to their coaching staff in that they have three full-time coaches. Do they not know how to play the game? Of course they do. **So it’s not a matter of what they don’t know how to do. It’s taking what they have and making it even better.**

At the Olympic training center I created a communication vehicle called “Colleen’s Corner” (a bulletin board of sorts) and everyday I would put up something new. It might be quotes, or techniques we’re working on, or feedback to the athletes. They would walk in that training center and they’d go to this corner right away to see what’s there and what I might be doing in the weeks ahead.

There are not many environments that are like the Olympics. I’m going to quickly take you through some of the issues that we faced at the Games, but you can apply many of these situations to the state, provincial, or whatever level you’re dealing with. There are some unique moments where the pressure is on and athletes know it. We had to deal with an unbelievable amount of security and safety. This is just one example. We had 20 motorcycle police officers assigned to the team. When we were on the bus there

were two helicopters over top, there were FBI agents with weapons on their legs or in the waist bands of their trousers. The security was omnipresent. How do you handle that? Our approach was, if you can't beat them, join them. We enjoyed it, including chartered flights and media presence. We were committed to the mission at hand, but also to enjoying the experience. There wasn't a time when we didn't pay attention. I remember vividly the first moment that we walked out onto the Olympic soccer field. Carla Overbeck, veteran captain and world champion, and I were walking out. We just kept saying, "Can you believe this?" Isn't this great!" That was true excitement. From the Opening ceremonies to each Olympic moment, I can assure you that there's nothing like it. Incredible, exhausting, time-consuming. But you grew up hearing about these events since you were a kid. You're meeting new people for the first time, famous people, people that were your idols and role models. It's an indescribable time.

We had 16 players on the Olympic team and four alternates. What about the alternates? We had a talented and diverse group of alternates. On your team it might be the starters and the reserves or players that aren't on the official roster. How do you handle the people that aren't in the limelight? We specifically attended to these issues and concerns.

There was incredible media pressure and notoriety associated with the Olympic Games. We were constantly signing autographs on balls, posters, programs, whatever it might be. How do you handle it if the weight of the world is on your shoulders? If you've never seen the hype around this team, it is an absolute frenzy. For example, take Mia Hamms' situation. People are screaming her name and everybody wants an interview. Everybody, or so it seems, wants "something" from her. How do you handle

that pressure? You don't even get one step off the bus and there's this crush, and mass of people screaming at you.

Another reality that people don't usually think about for elite athletes is the tremendous amount of downtime and waiting that's involved. Is that the time where nerves take over? Is that the time where your thoughts wreak havoc with potential issues and concerns that could go wrong with your performance? What do you do in the waiting hours? How do you handle that?

What about family? There's all kinds of family pressures, and without question, they're exerting an influence, "I hope you can do this for me" or, "How do you feel today?" Well meaning intentions can overwhelm athletes at this critical time. And other life events don't just stop because you're competing in the Olympic Games. Julie Foudy celebrated her first wedding anniversary in the middle of the Olympics. How do spouses and significant others cope with long absences and then intense time together?

As a sport psychologist I don't feel anything is more valuable to me (and to my learning and effectiveness) than just watching and listening. You just have to get your head up, look around and be attentive. Crucial professional assets for me are my listening and observation skills.

Developing the psychological skills triad

I have said that what we do with our team is something that any coach could apply. If coaches asked me, "What things could I do, no matter what age, or level I'm coaching?" I'd say, "Use the psychological skills triad: goal setting, affirmations and imagery". I absolutely recommend these three skills as the centerpiece of any program.

Goal setting - Looking at short, mid and long-range goals, written in specific terms and a specific time to completion noted. They should be written in behavioral, observable terms. They should be difficult, but realistic.

Affirmations - Really examining, controlling and improving self talk. Although we utilized many techniques, there is one we used with great success. A number of players have longer hair and wear scrunchies to hold it back. I have them wear a scrunchie on their wrist and if they say something negative or if they had negative self talk, they'd have to snap that scrunchie. That was their cue to say, "Hey, smarten up!" Note the negative, replace it with a positive, and move on.

Imagery - This is something that athletes can do any place, anywhere, any time. Some of our athletes preferred to image when they woke up in the morning, or before they went to sleep at night. Athletes can image, in split seconds before taking a free kick. Athletes can image how they wanted to feel, and how they wanted to be when the match started or finished. To facilitate imagery, we created imagery video tapes. These were not highlight tapes but imagery tapes. We also created audio cassette tapes to guide athletes through issues ranging from team to personal performance issues and always focusing on those aspects of their game over which they have control.

Many of these techniques are based on self-consistency theory that simply posits that human beings act in ways that are consistent with how they see themselves. So, if you change how athletes feel about themselves, you're going to change how they behave, and how they appear to the outside world. Athletes and coaches need to understand how powerful their expectations can be.

Self-fulfilling prophecy cycle

Your expectations as a coach do affect how you treat athletes and, as athletes, expectations influence how you perform. We treat athletes that we expect a great deal of, much differently. We praise them more. We interact with them more. We might give them more high-fives, or pats on the back. That treatment affects athletes' behavior, their performance and their learning rate. If those expectations are rigid and occur over a long enough period of time, eventually athletes behavior conforms to those expectations. This same self-fulfilling prophecy could be applied for athletes' own expectations of themselves.

In the goal setting program, we want to give athletes optimal challenges. I'll give you one quick example on how specific this can be. We have a starting midfielder who, when a ball was played into her, set a goal to stop the ball rather than keep it moving all the time. There are times in a game where a ball was played into her and she needed to stop it dead, take a look and maybe spin out of pressure. She wasn't doing this at an acceptable level. Together we set a goal that at least 30 % of the time a ball was played into her, she would stop it rather than keep going. Since I'm at practice every day and able to check on her progress, I'd count every ball that was played into her and what she did with it. At the end of the day I'd be able to say, "Well, you did that 20 % of the time or you did that 70 % of the time". I'd be able to provide very specific, accurate, behavioral and contingent feedback on how athletes were doing in their goal-set areas.

Again, it's important to emphasize that we want athletes focusing their energy on what they can control. They can control effort, they can control process but they cannot completely control outcome. One of the things, I love in Terry Orlick's work with athletes was the refocusing concept of 'park

it'. When an error occurs, you park it. You leave it there. You don't forget about it, you just park it. And you go on. Because you know when you're most likely to make a mistake again? It's after the first one. It has a way of repeating itself. So **we literally taught athletes: a mistake occurs, note it, park it, move on.** Then, at an appropriate time, possibly at the end of practice or in the evening, we go back to what we parked and have a look. We see what we could have done better. We want athletes to win within. We want to imagine the possibility of unlimited possibilities. We want to dare to achieve. And hopefully, this is what you want for your athletes as well.

A hallmark of our success is certainly team unity and an unwavering commitment to each other. We are constantly asking athletes, 'What are you doing to contribute to team chemistry? What are you doing to contribute to the success of this team?'

Mental plans

"Positive thinking may not always help but negative thinking almost always hurts."
Terry Orlick

We devote a great deal of time to our mental plans. Athletes are encouraged to develop mental plans about pre-competition, imagery thoughts and knowing that they trained well enough and are good enough to expect victory. The literature doesn't show that positive thinking helps performance; what the literature shows is that negative thinking hurts performance. In essence, you can't do two things at the same time. So, if negative thinking hurts, then if we're thinking positive, it rules out the possibility of those negative images and negative talk. We want to give athletes positive things to think, to see, and to do.

One of the tangible contributions that both the coaching staff and the athletes felt was

most helpful in our program was the creation of the imagery tapes. Each athlete's tape was about five to six minutes long, and we included athlete-selected music. Music players picked was dubbed over top of these visual images. The images were designed to take athletes through virtually every aspect that they would face in the contest, from marching out onto the field, to the opening kickoff, to tactical challenges, to how they were going to handle the physical demands of the game, to how they were going to respond to fatigue.

We had athletes and the coaching staff develop performance profiles. By position (goalkeepers, forwards, midfielders, and defenders) profiles were collectively constructed and adopted as a unit. We posted samples of those performance profiles sometimes including how athletes were feeling, and where they rated themselves on a continuum. I could do an entire talk just on the development and implementation of performance profiles.

Pre-Competition Phase

1. Psychological Warm-up Self - Suggestions – combines a series of self-suggestions about how well you've prepared, your capacity to push yourself, the fact that you've performed extremely well before, to create the ideal feeling and mental state (preparation, readiness, ability, adaptability, commitment to give everything)

(I am strong, I am good, I am ready, I am the best, play my game, I am prepared, in control, capable, I can achieve it, draw from the well, extend yourself, follow your plan, you are ready, Do It!)

2. Prestart Focus - brief self-reminders of event focus, focus on first few seconds before the start of the match and at other critical junctures

3. Imagery - activating images, calming images, organized and detailed vs. loose and unstructured, feel, see and believe in a good performance

A major focus for our team, and certainly an important one for your team, is developing a precompetition plan. Most of these details we asked athletes to commit to paper. When you write it, there's a level of ownership that you just don't see otherwise. We want athletes focusing on their psychological warm-up. Athletes literally write-down what they want to say, how they want to feel and what they are doing physically at any given moment. These plans can occur from the second they wake-up in the morning until that final whistle blows at the end of the game. Some athletes like these plans to be very detailed while others prefer them to be loose and flexible. Some examples of their self-talk reminders or focusing comments include, "I'm strong. I'm good. I'm ready. I'm in control". What we want these athletes focusing on, over and over again, is what they can control.

"Train well enough to be good enough to win, then focus solely on your own performance" Terry Orlick

Getting psyched for games is usually not a problem when you're playing an arch rival, or you're in the Olympics, or you're in the World Cup. But getting athletes fired up at an appropriate level and maintaining that intensity so they are game ready when that whistle blows for all games is critically important. Athletes do worry. Any time your name, your reputation, or something that's important to you is on the line, those doubts and those nightmares can creep in. We don't want athletes to ignore them. We want to note them. We want to be able to replace them, and, we want them to be able to move on.

Even small gestures can take on significant symbolism. Something as seemingly trivial as how athletes hang their jerseys in the locker room and what that means to them ('that's my name, that's my number, and this is my country') takes on significance. There's a tremendous amount of pride and ritual in pre-game routines. Prior to the semi final against Norway, you can see athletes listening to their pre game tapes. They're going into themselves or they're talking to other people. The key is that each individual needs to know what are the strategies and behaviors that she needs to engage in for a best performance. We've had athletes analyze their best performance. We want to repeat the successful elements of that routine. Kristine Lilly, the most capped player in the world, listens to an audio-tape that we've developed as part of her pre-game routine.

Refocusing at the event

- In less than ideal situations, look for reasons why you should still be confident and optimistic
- After distractions, negative self-talk, worries, etc., "Stop, park it", refocusing cue word ("dance, play, attack, enjoy, flow")
- Do what you can do, draw the positive lesson, shift focus, think of successes, positive images and capabilities
- Anyone who does not believe in miracles is not a realist
- Let the coaches deal with it, not my department
- Use relaxation tape, listen to music, quick relaxation techniques

- Confident performers focus on what they want to happen, others focus on what they fear might happen
- Performance is rooted in expectations and beliefs
- Choose how you want to think, feel and focus, You are in control

In a ninety minute match a lot happens; momentum switches, you're up a goal, you're down a goal, you're up a man, you're down a man, there is a bad call by the official, a key player is injured and is carried off. Refocusing at the event is critical, and we developed what Terry Orlick calls "what if" strategies. We asked athletes to consider, "What would you do if? What would you say if? What would you think if?" We tried to create as many different realistic scenarios as we could so that athletes never faced them for the first time in actual competition. It's a buffered kind of learning where athletes get to practice coping, recovering, and achieving without having to face the actual event.

We don't want athletes to panic and yet it sometimes happens. You can see it in our sport almost any day of the year. In order to lessen the likelihood of the choking process, athletes are taught mind to muscle techniques and also muscle to mind techniques. In other words, sometimes thoughts trigger tenseness in our bodies, and other times physical fatigue and tiredness triggers negative thinking in our minds. We want to develop strategies for both mind to muscle and muscle to mind interventions. For example, when you feel yourself getting tense, then refocus on healthy, productive, calming breathing or perhaps you need to check your self-talk patterns. Are you saying the things that will make you a stronger, better, and improved player? Those moments when

you're walking out onto the field, that's a critical time for you to revisit your pre-game plan. Revisit the feeling, the intensity, the emotion and the tactical challenges you're going to face. The point is, take control of these moments and of these events or they may very well take control of you.

In the locker room prior to the gold medal match, every athlete was fully absorbed in her pre-game focus. Literally, many had their pre-game tapes playing until the final minutes prior to the start of the match. When they saw a photograph of this time period in the locker room, they said, "You know everyone of us is listening to you right now". In other words, they wanted to take control. They wanted to know what they were planning, what they were hearing, and what they were seeing. Each individual needs to cultivate a pre-game routine that best suits their own peak performance needs and something over which they have control.

Team building

- Problem solving
- Communication skills
- Leadership development
- Cooperative efforts and evolution
- Risk taking
- Frustration tolerance
- Creative adjustments
- Interpersonal understanding
- Fun

Team building is an invaluable part of any team's success. But team building isn't just playing games, or having fun, or having a break from training. We take team building very seriously, even though we're laughing often times during the team building sessions. We can work on problem solving, communication, developing leadership, handling adversity, dealing with frustration, cooperating with one another, increasing inter-

personal understanding and risk taking. It's amazing when we're doing trust dives, or trust falls, you see elite athletes suddenly get tense and worried. Without question, there's a lot of growth that occurs. There's a tremendous amount of literature in the area of team building from groups such as Project Adventure, the NOLS program etc. to the cooperative games literature. Terry Orlick has written extensively about the use of cooperative games in developing both competitive and cooperative kinds of skills. We want athletes certainly to contribute to the team, to be one of the group, but we also want them to be themselves. We want to find a place where they can be who they are.

Enjoyment, I think is one of the most critical underlying factors for success. You work harder when you're enjoying what you're doing. You train more, and longer, and you train in the presence of adversity when you're enjoying what you're doing. We want athletes literally to enjoy the trip, and not just focus on the final destination. Less than three weeks before the Olympics we went out as a group and just focused on team building. The day before the Gold Medal match, again, our focus was on team building rather than on tactics or additional physical practice.

A crystallizing moment for each of us occurred the night before the very first Olympic Game. We had a meeting and looked at these athletes with all their worries and concerns, and all of their hopes and dreams coming together. We very, very clearly let them know that "this is the team and now is the time". It was that mentality that carried us. Yes, it worked out well and it was an incredible experience but we didn't have to finish first to be winners. Seventy seven thousand fans packed the Olympic stadium and got to participate in our gold medal match. But, all of the work that went into

that performance behind the scenes is something that I don't think anybody will ever know or fully appreciate unless you've been in that specific situation.

There are these moments, when you've kept your eyes on the prize, when you know what you're working for and you know what's at stake and what you have accomplished together. Seeing each and every athlete in that wonderfully intimate, personal relationship with their gold medal was one of those moments. Tiffeny Milbrett, Briana Scurry, Brandi Chastain, Mia Hamm and others gave unbelievable, heroic and selfless performances. Julie Foudy and Carla Overbeck, our co-captains of the team, were truly thrilled and excited. What a moment! I took probably 800 photographs during the course of the Olympics and only a few of the ones I took on the medal stand weren't blurry. I think everybody who was there was crying in some way or another. It was a moment for a lifetime.

We've come a long way. Both as a soccer community in the United States and in Canada, but certainly we looked at 1996 as the year of the woman in sport. It's not just for her, that elite, gold medal, potential world champion athlete. It's for all players who love the game, who want to be strong and vibrant, and want this beautiful game of soccer to positively impact their lives. There's a tremendous give and take that occurs in athletics, where sport changes the person, and the person changes the sporting experience. This gold medal was a victory for many people and causes both in and out of the sport environment.

In summary, I do believe that psychological skills training has a place in all levels of sport. Ideally and realistically it's best if the coach gets the necessary training, and the coach functions, if you will, as a sport psy-

chologist with his or her team. You don't necessarily need to bring in an outside expert. You don't need to pay for somebody's services if you do your reading and you attend workshops and you continue to grow as an individual. One of the best places to start is with yourself. Don't just teach about imagery, learn it and do it yourself. Don't just tell athletes about goal-setting, set goals, adhere to them and follow through yourself. Don't just talk to athletes about thinking positive and not getting down on themselves. Model that for them. Model that for yourself. It starts within. That's why after you develop your base of knowledge and you learn more, begin to implement these techniques personally. I think the Women's National Soccer Team knows that these aren't things that I just talk about, these are things that I do and I do them on a consistent and daily basis. I live the very techniques and the principles that I try to teach athletes. That's a great place for you to start as well.

I want to encourage you to infuse psychological skills training as part of the daily training environment. It should be done in the weight room, on the practice field, and on the game field. Certainly you may have some meetings or outside discussions about PST, but **the centerpiece of psychological skills training should occur in the environment in which it occurs.**

It's not just for problem athletes. It's for athletes who want to maximize their potential. If you had an athlete who was marvelously talented but they weren't physically strong enough, what would you do? Most people would say, "I'd get them in the weight room. I'd have them practice. I'd have them training, I'd have a whole weight training program for them". You wouldn't just say, "Oh wow, that's so disappointing, they could be great if only they were stronger". Yet coaches sometimes approach

psychological skills training as though either athletes have it or they don't. You're mentally tough or you're not. You're really committed and dedicated or not. Not so...these are skills and they can be trained and improved with practice. There are people with more or less innate abilities, but all of us can get better, all of us can get stronger, all of us can learn to exert more and greater control.

Questions

The first question that comes up is, "At what age can I start psychological skills training?" "Is there a time that it is too young, or inappropriate?" There have been variations of psychological skills training used with children as young as five and six years of age. The level of sophistication, the kinds of things that you might do with kids, is obviously very different than what you would do with teenagers or adults. Some of the things that you can do with children are things like monitoring their self-talk. When you hear kids say, "I'm just not any good", or, "I've never been able to do this" or, "This is just too difficult for me". That's a time for you to step in and talk to them about their own self-talk, and their belief in themselves. So starting very young listen to the language that kids are using about their skills, and about their abilities.

Goal setting - whether a child might come into a practice at six years of age, or 14 years of age, or 32 years of age, you specifically say, "What are we going to work on today? Are we going to try to get off five shots on goal during the scrimmage time? Are we going to try to pass to three different teammates today?" You can increase or decrease the level of difficulty in terms of goal setting that you might use with a child vs. a national team player.

Attribution, which is simply the reasons that kids give, or any human beings give for that matter, for success or failure. Listen to the reasons why a child thinks that they won or lost a game. As the coach and as a parent you want to encourage children to put stock in their hard work, in their effort, in their ability. Rather than issues like, “Well, I was lucky that’s why I won”. Or “I won because I’m better than someone else”. Because next week, or next month, or next year they may be playing an opponent that they feel is too difficult. So basically we want to encourage children to assume responsibility for their success and to believe that after failure, hard work is something that they can really attack and have control over.

What types of training are appropriate? At any age self-talk and affirmations, and affirmations are simply positive, present tense, self statements that reveal what you can do, what you believe, what you intend to do. “We have prepared well”. “I am a strong and confident player”. “I have trained hard for this competition”. “We are ready to play today”. All of those are examples of affirmations that increase the likelihood of positive outcomes. Certainly as coaches you all know the negative types of self-statements and affirmations. “I’m not any good”. “Man we just got thrashed by this team”. “He’s always been better than me”. Really listen to what athletes are saying and try to help them turn these negatives to positives. We do this with Olympic athletes and its appropriate for you to do with five and six-year-olds.

There something called a self-fulfilling prophecy where eventually a child, or any athlete’s behavior, starts to conform to their expectations. You’ve heard the adage, “**Be careful of what you hope for, you just may get it**”. A lot of times because of beliefs, those tapes that athletes are running in

their minds, their beliefs set themselves up for failure. After an error athletes tend to dwell on the error, on their imperfections, on their problems. All that that does is increase the likelihood of future errors to occur. So we want athletes to focus on what they do well, on their strengths, especially after errors, we want them to note the error, replace what the problem was with what should have been done, and then move on. So the area of self-confidence and trying to alter negative self-fulfilling prophecies is another important area to work on.

I’m a real believer that goal setting can and should be used at all ages. Goal setting is more effective if the behaviors are specific, if they’re observable, if you write your goals down, if the athlete participates in the goal setting process, rather than just the coach giving the athletes their goals. Let’s talk about what you want to accomplish today. Focus on goals that you have control over - process oriented goals rather than outcome. In other words, as a soccer player I can control the technique that I use in shooting. I can control whether I shoot or not. But I can’t control whether the goal goes in, or whether the goalkeeper makes a brilliant save. So we want goal setting to focus on what we can control, observable behaviors, really being able to quantify what you want from that athlete. A quality first touch that’s within a yard of my plant foot. Getting off five shots. Being able to execute three crosses into the 18, would be an example of goal setting.

It is so vitally important that we highlight and encourage athletes to attribute their successes to factors over which they have control, internal and controllable types of factors. For failures we want the athletes to be able to feel as though the reasons for the failure can be changed, so they’re unstable, meaning I can change it. “I can exert higher

effort next week. “I can practice between Saturday and the next game”. So after error or after failure I want to believe that I have the requisite skills and motivation to make the changes that I need to.

Another question that came up is what are the differences between girls and boys or men and women in terms of psychological skills training? While it could be a long complicated answer the simplest thing that I would say is the ball is round. We’re dealing with athletes first rather than gender. The kinds of techniques that are effective for women are effective for men. The kinds of techniques that you want to implement within the practice setting, you are infinitely better off considering the gender similar rather than trying to pinpoint where these differences might be. Some of you are coaching males only, some of you are coaching females only, the point that I’m making is that psychological skills training simply works. Regardless of the gender you want to reach that individual athlete.

The final point is, How do I handle a slump, or an expected slump? “We had this big win

last week and then we worry about this let down the next week” or “We played great on Friday, how do we continue that on Saturday?”. Well very simply, one of the factors of slumps is focusing on external kinds of things: the quality of the opponent, how important the contest is. We want to frame athletes’ motivations from an intrinsic perspective. Their opponent is themselves. Their challenges are within. Their opponents aren’t someone else or someone else’s record. So you want to focus on specific goals that the individual and the team can collectively accomplish. We want them to be competing against our own best self. Not against the opponent. If you can focus on the task at hand, rather than the ego involved, if you can focus on the goals that individuals can control, these are the things that can make the biggest difference. Slumps are common but I would honestly say to you they don’t need to occur with the frequency that they do, and they certainly don’t need to last for an entire game, or for a part of the season. You really can take some steps to intervene, in what we call “slump busting” kinds of behaviors.