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SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

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FOR
REAL LIFE

DR ARNOLD LEUNES

A PRACTICAL GUIDE



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About the author

Dr Arnold LeUnes is Professor of Psychology at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. His main teaching areas are sport psychology and abnormal psychology, and his research focuses almost totally on sport-related issues. He has written a popular textbook on sport psychology as well as a reference work on psychological testing in sport psychology, published over 100 journal articles, and made well over 100 conference presentations. He is married to Judy, an animal rights and teacher advocate, and has six children ages 22 to 48 and nine grandchildren.

Author's note

It's important to note that there is much frequently-used research employed in sport psychology. Where I know the source I have been sure to reference it, but my apologies here to the originators of any material if I have overlooked them.

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1. The field of sport psychology: an overview

What is sport psychology?

Let's begin with a case study.



Melanie is a talented 16-year-old long-distance swimmer whose short-term goal is to compete at the collegiate level, with an eye, long-term, on making the Olympic team. She has struggled of late with motivation and what appears to be burnout, and her coach is frustrated by her inability to rekindle Melanie's competitive fire. The two of them talk the situation over and agree that something has to give. This leads the coach to see if she can locate a sport psychologist to help Melanie get her competitive edge back.

The local phone books fail to turn up anything, but a call to a university athletic department points them in a potentially productive direction. The person they talk with says that there's a national organization devoted to sport psychology that, among other things, keeps a registry of sport psychology practitioners. Their website is a rich source of information about the field, including a list of potential sources of help in Melanie's area.

A phone call is made and the coach sets up an appointment for Melanie to talk with a sport psychologist

specializing in staleness, burnout, and loss of competitive edge. Weekly counseling sessions, in which proven techniques and procedures are employed, eventually get Melanie back on track, and she resumes her training with the gusto of old.

The hypothetical case of Melanie serves as an introduction to what is known popularly as sport psychology, or more properly, **sport and exercise psychology**. This broader title emphasizes the twin challenges for professionals working in the field. Helping individual athletes and sport teams perform better is one of the many challenges for the sport side of the equation. On the other hand, using psychological principles to improve exercise adherence and enjoyment of physical activity illustrates a couple of the challenges facing the exercise domain.

Sport psychology is a specialty within the broader science of psychology. It emphasizes the relationship between **psychological** and **behavioral** principles that exert an impact on sport and exercise performance, and how these can be applied. When people contact a sport psychologist for whatever reason, it's expected that the professional will be able to perform a number of functions – and where they cannot, make an appropriate referral to someone who can.

Why do people need help from sport psychology?

- A common reason for seeking assistance from a sport psychologist is to improve sport performance. Athletes have sought the competitive edge since the ancient Olympic games in Greece, and a fair number think that sport psychology principles can assist them in accomplishing this aim.
- Another reason someone might seek sport psychological assistance is to manage interfering anxiety. Athletic events are sometimes heavy on stress and some athletes manage anxiety better than others. Most sport psychologists are well trained in the area of anxiety management.
- Yet another motive might be to help improve the sport experience for young people. As we'll see later, youth sport can be a real pressure-cooker for kids, and sport psychologists can contribute to a better sport experience for them.
- From time to time, athletes get injured, and sport psychologists are becoming increasingly involved in the rehabilitation process. There's an obvious physical component to a sports injury, but the recuperation process is often heavily psychological.
- Finally, the sport psychologist can put on his or her exercise hat and develop strategies for improving exercise adherence and enjoyment.

All of these topics are covered in the following chapters.



It's also highly likely that many of the things sport psychologists teach athletes will have application to other aspects of their lives. For example, learning to manage sport-related anxiety can have equal application to managing anxiety when taking important classroom examinations. The aim of this book, then, is to show how psychological principles are used, in practice, in sport and exercise settings, and how these same principles can often apply to everyday life events.



Q. I'm considering pursuing a career in exercise psychology. Is there a resource I can consult to get a clearer picture of what the field is all about?

A. Bonnie Berger, David Pargman, and Robert Weinberg wrote a book on the topic entitled *Foundations of Exercise Psychology*, which was published by Fitness Information Technology in 2006.

Q. I want to keep up with daily developments in sport psychology. Is there a website that can do that for me?

A. Yes. Dr Michael Sachs at Temple University in Philadelphia moderates a sport psychology site. To subscribe to the website, contact Dr Sachs at: SPORTPSY@LISTSERV.TEMPLE.EDU

What do sport psychologists do?

Briefly, sport psychologists participate in three main activities: **teaching**, **research**, and **practice**. The first two, teaching and research, typically are conducted in conjunction with each other in the university setting. To get a feeling for these three activities in the work setting, let's look at typical days in the life of an academic and an applied practitioner.



A day in the life of an academic sport psychologist

Though things vary from day to day with teaching assignments and research duties, a typical day might be spent preparing for an hour or so for back-to-back classes, actually teaching those classes for two hours, then coming back to the office to meet with some research assistants. After lunch it's time for office hours, departmental meetings, maybe a consultation with an athlete, and perhaps some writing or preparation for an upcoming conference presentation. By then, it's time to head home for a meal and then back to school to make a presentation to a school group. By 9.00pm, the day is wrapped up with a couple of hours of family time.



A day in the life of the applied sport psychology practitioner

It's safe to say that one size doesn't fit all, so it's somewhat difficult to characterize a typical day in the life of a sport psychologist in private practice. Nonetheless, a day might begin by conducting individual and/or team performance enhancement sessions and, with the necessary credentials and training, providing clinical or counseling services to an athlete with personal problems. When not seeing clients, the applied person busies themselves with documentation of sessions, writing or creative projects, and perhaps going out to a sports venue later in the day to watch some clients at their team practice. This might also result in consultation with coaches at the site.

Most (though not all) sport psychology courses and programs are found in Departments of Kinesiology or Movement Sciences, and yet a number of key positions, for example those found at the US Olympic Committee, require the practitioner to have the doctoral degree in the field of Clinical or Counseling Psychology and a license to practice in their state or province. Interested professionals in countries such as Australia, Canada, and Great Britain where the programs in sport psychology also have deep roots in kinesiology and movement science, have also

been wrestling with this issue. To deal with licensing, divisions have been created within the psychological societies of those three countries to provide opportunities for professionals to express their opinions and enjoy the benefits of membership in such associations. Other countries with less well-developed sport psychology programs, such as those in Asia and Europe, are making progress in this regard.

The Appendices at the back of this book give fuller details of the history of sport psychology and of various key figures in the field.



Q. I'm interested in finding a sport psychologist to work with my 14-year-old who aspires to be professional soccer player. Where do I go?

A. Consult the Yellow Pages in your local phone directory or call the athletic department at a nearby university to see if one is employed there. Or, alternatively, ask for the names of any coaches who have contracted on their own for sport psychological services. Try the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) website: <http://appliedsportpsych.org>

Why do we have sport psychology?

The field has developed for at least five major reasons.

One is **national identity** – nations pride themselves on their athletic accomplishments, and national esteem and

validation of various political philosophies are often associated with athletic achievement.

Secondly, there is **money** in sport: it's a multi-billion-dollar enterprise with high stakes. Owners spend hundreds of millions or even billions today to purchase major sports teams; athletes are given massive salaries to ply their skills on the pitch, the diamond, the gymnasium, or the football field; golfers make millions trying to put the little white ball into the small, elusive hole.

A third reason for the emergence of sport psychology is the continuing growth of our **fascination with youth sports**. Millions of children all over the globe take part in sports, a movement with relatively recent roots and much attendant controversy.

A fourth reason for sport psychology is **spectatorship**. Fanatical sports fans are legendary and have been the subject of much speculation and some research of late, trying to figure out what makes sports so fascinating to them and why they behave the way they do at athletic events.

And finally, the **fitness movement** has added to the demand for sport psychology services, again to enhance both participation and enjoyment. It's this seeking of national identity, fame, money, youth sports enjoyment, spectatorship, and the pursuit of fitness that have elevated sport psychology to the status of major player in the worlds of sports and fitness.



Q. I'm interested in getting an advanced degree with a specialization in sport psychology. Where can I go to find information?

A. Fitness Information Technology in Morgantown, West Virginia publishes a *Directory of Graduate Programs in Applied Sport Psychology*, which is in its 9th edition as of 2008. Details of graduate programs in the US, Britain, Canada, and Australia and New Zealand are featured.



It's important to remember that sport and exercise psychology is a relatively new field that embraces both the domains of sports and fitness, and is made up of professionals from both kinesiology and psychology who, somehow, peacefully co-exist.

2. Reinforcement and punishment

There's no denying the fact that genetics exerts a powerful influence over human development throughout our lives. However, to gain a more thorough understanding of human behavior we need to be aware of the interplay between **reinforcement** (i.e. reward) and **punishment**. It makes absolutely no difference whether one is coaching young athletes, running a business, raising children, or commanding a military unit: the person with a thorough understanding of how to use reinforcement and punishment is going to be more effective in shaping desired behavior than someone who lacks this expertise.

What is reinforcement?

Reinforcement is defined as anything that increases the likelihood of a subsequent response. Key to understanding is the word 'anything'. A dog cookie may reinforce begging on the part of a hungry house pet; a pat on the back from a respected coach may increase the desire of a football player to excel; or, unfortunately, abuse can make a woman with low self-esteem come back for more abuse, despite well-understood undesirable consequences.

Types of reinforcement

Reinforcement may be primary or secondary, or positive or negative. **Primary reinforcement** is attached to some basic

or biological need. Food when hungry and water when thirsty are prime examples. Also, the athlete who has had his or her breath knocked out knows the reinforcing properties of being able to breathe good old air! **Secondary reinforcement** works through association with primary reinforcement. A good example of secondary reinforcement is money: money takes on reinforcing properties not because it has any inherent value (you can't eat money), but rather due to its association with primary rewards such as food or sex. Medals, badges, trophies, public recognition, pats on the back, nods of the head, and an unanticipated smile from a beautiful woman or handsome man all qualify as powerful secondary reinforcement.

As for **positive reinforcement**, it increases desirable behavior through its presentation. A desirable behavior takes place and a reward is dispensed, thus increasing the likelihood that the behavior will occur again. The same result may be obtained through **negative reinforcement**, but the mechanism is more difficult to understand. Negative reinforcement increases the likelihood of recurrence of a particular behavior by preventing or avoiding a negative consequence. The end result is the same as positive reinforcement, in that the desired behavior is made more likely – for example in sports, because the athlete prevents or avoids something negative, such as the wrath of the coach.

It's common among laymen to equate negative reinforcement with punishment, but they are not one and the same. Negative reinforcement, again, implies avoiding