

How Can Sport Psychology Help Athletes?

by [Dr. Patrick J. Cohn](#)

The question you need to ask yourself is this: Am I performing up to my capability? I'm sure you know some fellow athletes who have "great talent" or physical skills, but haven't played up to their potential. One of the myths athletes buy into is that you first must develop "perfect" technique or knowledge about ones sport before you can work on the so-called mental game. But, from my perspective, you cannot separate the mental from the physical when it comes to motor skills. Decisions, thoughts, images, and feelings set up each action you take. Sport psychology helps athletes develop confidence and focusing skills as they master the technical aspects of the game.

Athletes often ask me this question: "How do I know when a poor performance or error is a physical or a mental problem?" From my experience, here are a few hints that it may be a mental breakdown:

1. You perform much better in practice than during competition
2. You have a tough time performing well when others are watching you
3. You maintain many doubts about your sport before or during games
4. You feel anxious or scared when you perform in competition
5. You are not sure why you play your sport or what motivates you
6. You only participate in sports to feel better about yourself as a person
7. You lose focus or have mental lapses during critical times of the game
8. You can't perform the way you did pre-injury, but are physically 100%
9. Everything is fine, but you just want to improve your mental attitude

Sport psychology sometimes gets a bad reputation because of the association of psychology with pathology. That is why I prefer to call what I do mental game coaching or mental training, which athletes understand. Mental game coaching is for athletes who want to improve upon their current performance and take their games to the next level with the help of a mental coach like myself.

But most athletes, unfortunately, seek out my services because of a particular performance barrier or decrease in performance. As a mental game coach, I often become the last resort after athletes have tried other means to get beyond performance slumps. I wish it wasn't this way, but athletes wait until some needs to be "fixed" and they have exhausted all other resources before they commit to mental game coaching.

How can sport psychology help you perform better? Here is the most obvious list:

1. Improve focus and deal with distractions.
2. Grow confidence in athletes who have many doubts.
3. Develop coping skills to deal with setbacks and errors.
4. Find the right zone of intensity for your sport.
5. Help teams develop communication skills and cohesion.
6. To instill a healthy belief system and weed out irrational thoughts.
7. Improve and balance motivation for optimal performance.
8. Get back into competition after an injury is healed fully.
9. To develop game-specific strategies and game plans.
10. To identify and enter the “zone” more often.

Sport psychology may not be for every single athlete. Not everyone involved in sport wants to “improve performance.” Sport psychology is probably not for recreation athletes who just like the social component of sport. Most of my students are committed to excellence and seeing how far they can go. They love competition and testing themselves against the best in their sport. They want every possible advantage they can learn including the mental edge over the competition.