Teaching a Mental Skill

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Abstract

There are six mental skills that an athlete can use to improve his or her performance: goal-setting, imagery, self-talk, routines, anxiety/energy management, and attention management. Of the six types of mental skills, the focus of this paper is on goal-setting. "Goal-setting has long been accepted as a practical technique to increase and direct motivation in achievement-oriented fields" like sports (Filby, Maynard, and Graydon, 1999, p. 230). This is the reason why I wanted to teach my athlete the mental skill of goal-setting. To teach my athlete the mental skill of goal-setting, I conducted an interview session with her to determine what goal would be set so that she could improve in basketball. I wanted to focus her attention on a basketball skill so that she could have something specific to work towards. The SMART goal-setting method was used to set a goal for the athlete. Afterwards, feedback was obtained from the athlete and a period of reflection was used to improve the goal-setting session for a second interview. From the athlete feedback and my own personal reflection, I changed the flow of interview by breaking up my long explanations into shorter and clearer points. Because my athlete is more of a beginner in basketball, I also prepared suggestions so that she would have examples and a frame of reference for her goal setting. A revised SMART goal-setting method was used for the second interview with the same athlete. I again solicited feedback from the athlete and reflected on improvements that could be made for future goal-setting interviews.

Introduction

Mental skills training is training that an athlete undertakes to become more aware of the mental factors that improve his or her performance (Driska, 2015, Introduction to Mental Skills). When mental skills training is conducted it increases awareness. The way an athlete increases his or her mental skill is through education and training. The athlete makes deliberate efforts to identify mental skills that can be learned and refined to improve player consistency and to improve player performance (Ibid.). There are six mental skills that an athlete can use to improve his or her performance but I chose to focus on goal-setting skill because according to Driska (2015), "goal-setting is good for strategizing and directing athlete's attention to the details of a task that are critical in development" and my athlete needed goal-setting to focus her attention on making a strategy to develop her shooting skills (Introduction to Goal-Setting).

One of the mental challenges in the game of basketball is having mental toughness. What this means is that a basketball player needs to be mentally focused in order to do well. For example, shooting a basketball takes focus and concentration so that the ball ends up going in through the basketball hoop. Mental toughness is also needed when a player is in a pressure situation where the player has to score in order for his/her team to win with the time winding down. A lapse in mental toughness can lead to a missed shot and even worse, a loss.

The need of my athlete is to increase her shooting skill. In order to increase my athlete's shooting skill, I conducted a goal-setting intervention because evidence has shown that goal-setting has been used to enhance motivation and performance. William Filby, Ian Maynard, and Jan Graydon (1999) concluded that groups who have multiple goal strategies (outcome, performance, and process) performed better, both in training and in competition than groups who only had one type of goal and groups who had no goals. (p. 242).

Goal-setting is compelling because it can affect performance in four ways. The first is that goals can direct the attention and effort toward goal-relevant activities and away from goal irrelevant activities (Locke & Latham, 2002, p. 706). For example, if an basketball player's goal is to win a game, then that athlete will put effort into doing things that will help achieve that goal, such as scoring or playing defense. Second, goals have an "energizing function" (Ibid.). This is especially true for goals that are challenging. A challenging goal makes a player stay focused and makes the player give their best effort because a lapse in concentration can mean a failure to achieve the goal. Third, goals also affect persistence (Locke & Latham, 2002, p. 707). A goal just out of the reach of a player can motivate the player to keep trying until the goal is achieved. Fourth, goals affect players by leading players to the arousal, discovery, and/or use of task-relevant knowledge and strategies (Ibid.).

The purpose of this intervention was to teach the mental skill of goal-setting so that my athlete can set an appropriate goal as a means to improve her shooting skill. To assess the lesson's effectiveness, feedback was obtained from the athlete along with my reflection.

Method

The first thing I needed to do for my athlete was to assess her needs. I did this by doing a needs assessment. I conducted the needs assessment by using a needs assessment chart introduced in the Introduction to Performance Enhancement lecture video (Driska, 2015). The chart told me that my athlete had difficulty with focus and concentration. This was something I already knew because I had seen my player struggle with her shooting mechanics. Even before the intervention, I knew that shooting would be the skill that my athlete would want to work on but I wanted her to participate in the goal-setting process. The reason for this is, according to

Locke and Latham (2002), allowing subordinates to participate in the goal setting process would make the goals more important and would allow the goal-maker to own the goals (p. 708). I also wanted my athlete to work on something specifically to increase her skill. According to Ward (2011), goals should be specific (p. 101). All the training she had done for now was a vague "do your best" kind of training with the outcome goal of being a better basketball player. No specific plan or goal had been set for her to reach that goal.

Because I wanted my athlete to be personally invested in her goal-setting and to have a specific goal, I used the SMART goal-setting method for the intervention (Driska, 2015, What makes a good goal?). The lesson was delivered on a Friday afternoon in my office. In the lesson, I introduced the SMART goal-setting method to my athlete and explained what each letter in the acronym meant. Then I had my athlete identify what basketball skill she would like to work on. Lastly, my athlete and I used the SMART goal-setting method to set goals that would improve her shooting skill.

Immediately following the lesson I conducted a feedback session with my athlete to see what she liked and didn't like about the goal-setting intervention. I took her feedback and used it to reflect on what adjustments I would need to make for the second intervention. I also took time to see what I thought could have gone better during the intervention. The total time in between the first intervention and the second intervention was five days.

Once the adjustments had been made to the lesson, another goal-setting intervention was conducted with the same athlete. During the second goal-setting intervention, I had the athlete describe skills that an athlete would need to be considered a good basketball player. The listed skills were used with Butler and Hardy's (1992) performance profiling procedure (Weston, Greenlees, and Thelwell, 2013, p. 5). The performance profiling procedure is an assessment

strategy where athletes can give their opinions and perceptions of their own attributes and performance, and can be used to plot an athlete's own goal (Butler, Smith, & Irwin, 1993, p. 61). My athlete's completed performance profiling chart showed me that my athlete perceived her shooting skills to be one of her weaker skills. Then, I had my athlete prioritize which skill she thought was the most important in order for her to be a good basketball player and choose the skill that she would like to work on. After choosing a skill to work on (performance goal), I had my athlete set process goals using the SMART goal-setting method. For the second intervention I explained to my athlete one of the letters for the SMART goal-setting method and then had her set a specific process goal for that letter. This exchange was done for each letter until the SMART goal-setting method was completed.

Following the intervention, the athlete was asked for feedback of the second intervention. For the second intervention, I asked my athlete to do a comparison between the first intervention and the second. Her feedback was used to help me reflect on the goal-setting process and how I could make it better for her and other athletes in the future.

Results

First Delivery and Reflection

The first delivery had the athlete creating a performance goal of increasing her shooting percentage. Although the SMART goal-setting method was used to set process goals, the intervention did not stick to the SMART goal-setting format. According to the athlete, the most helpful part of the intervention and the part she enjoyed most was the goal-setting process because she was able to set concrete and definite goals instead of having abstract goals like "doing her best." The part that she thought was least helpful was the explanation of the SMART

goal-setting method. She thought it was difficult to apply because the explanation didn't seem to

go along with what we were doing. And it was too long and the SMART goal-setting method

didn't seem like it was clearly used during the intervention.

I used my athlete's comments as a basis for my reflection and tried to finetune my

intervention for the next time. I first started by taking a look at what she liked least about the

intervention. My athlete said that she didn't see how SMART was connected to the goal-setting

we had performed at the end of the intervention. This was because I did not clearly state that we

were doing the S part of SMART. To fix this issue, I decided to state out loud which step of the

SMART method we were going to do. When I reflected further, I thought that the way I started

my lesson needed adjusting. My athlete wasn't able to connect SMART with the goal-setting

process because my explanation was too long. I realized that I needed to keep my athlete's

attention when using the SMART goal-setting method so it would be better to break up the

explanation into smaller parts. Each explanation would only be delivered with the corresponding

letter of SMART. By clearly stating which step we will be working on and explaining only

pertinent information, I should be able to keep my athlete's attention and help her to see how

SMART is being used to connect with her goal.

Although I had my athlete choose her goal, I didn't think that I gave my athlete a good

big picture view of her abilities. I simply asked her what she wanted to improve and we started

setting up goals right away. To give my athlete a big picture view on the skills associated with

basketball, I think it would be good to have her complete a performance profile so then she can

see other basketball skills that she can improve on.

I would also like to give suggestions when my athlete is setting how she is going to

measure her goal and the target she would like to aim for. Initially, I did not give her any range

for shot percentage because I didn't want to influence her when she was goal-setting but I think

that giving her a reference point would help her set more realistic goals in the future.

Second Delivery and Reflection

For the most part, my athlete thought that the second intervention was better than the

first. She thought that breaking down the long explanation into smaller parts and delivering them

at the appropriate time helped her stay focused on making the details for the process goal. Also,

she said that stating which step we were working on and then explaining the stage helped her to

know how to answer the questions. My athlete also thought that the suggestions that I gave for

the measurement and aggressive but achievable step gave her a "standard of goodness" that

helped her come up with more realistic answers when working with the SMART goal-setting

method.

A change that didn't seem to have effect was the use of the performance profile. The

original intent for the performance profile was for the athlete to see other basketball skills that

she might be willing to work on. My athlete chose the same skill as the first intervention so it is

difficult to say if she considered the other skills at all.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to teach the mental skill of goal-setting so that my athlete

could set a specific goal as a means of increasing her shooting skill. To assess the lesson's

effectiveness, feedback was obtained from the athlete along with reflection from the coach.

Although the first intervention was technically successful because my athlete did use

goal-setting to help her set goals to increase her shooting, the intervention itself didn't run

smoothly. My long explanation at the beginning challenged my athlete's attention and didn't

work because I was forcing my athlete to remember all the details of what I had said. I also

didn't let her know when we were going to use the information. This made it difficult for her to

connect my explanation of SMART goal-setting with the actual process of SMART goal-setting.

The second intervention also was successful and seemed to go smoother than the first.

When I broke the long explanation down into more concise parts and delivering the parts at the

relevant times, she was able to fully understand the SMART goal-setting method.

Overall, I think the interventions were successful because specific goals were set. This

let the athlete know what she had to do in order to succeed. The SMART goal-setting method

provided a tangible way for her to work toward her goal. My athlete liked that everything was

very specific and had examples so that she could base her answers on the "standard of goodness"

instead of arbitrarily making answers, especially for the aggressive but achievable part of

SMART. Another reason why I think that both interventions were successful was because the

athlete shared what her goal was with the coach. Now, the coach can track the athlete and give

feedback and encouragement when the athlete has or hasn't reached her goal. It is a way to keep

the athlete accountable.

Implications

The implications of this study is that goal-setting can be used to help athletes improve

their skill. Coaches are able to focus their athlete's attention on what is critical so that the athlete

can improve his or her performance. An eye-opening aspect of this experience was how much

athletes need to have a specific goal in order to put in good effort. Having vague goals like

'trying my best' didn't really help the athlete in giving good effort and it was only when athletes

knew how far they had to go that they would try their best. The specific goal gives the athlete a

tangible target to reach for instead of an abstract target. I think goal-setting should be used by all

coaches to set up a plan that the athlete can follow up. Effort can be lost when the goal is

abstract so the coach should use goal-setting to make sure the athlete is doing what he or she is

supposed to be doing.

An aspect of goal setting that has been underestimated is the sharing of a goal. When an

athlete shares a goal with the coach, then he or she has the benefit of receiving advices and

feedback as to how to achieve the goal. Another benefit of sharing goals is that it would make an

athlete accountable for his or her actions that would follow. Coaches can remind the athletes of

their goals and hold them accountable so that they don't lose focus.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

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Lesson Plan 1

<u>Learning Target(s)/Objective(s):</u>

Athlete will learn about the SMART goal-setting method. Athlete will make a goal using the SMART goal-setting method.

<u>Materials:</u>

- Notebook

<u>Procedures and approximate time</u>

(Time: 15 minutes)

<u>Introduction</u>

5 minutes

The coach will explain the purpose of goal-setting. Then the coach will explain what the SMART goal-setting is and explain what each letter of SMART means.

- What is goal-setting?
    - it is strategizing and directing your attention to the details of the task that are critical
- SMART is used to set good goals
    - S = specific = it is objective and behavioral/observable
    - M = measurable = used to show us if we are coming close to the goal or not
    - (A) - A = (aggressive but) achievable = goal should be difficult but not too easy
    - R = relevant = should have a personal meaning (usually self-set)
    - T = time-bound = needs a start/finish date, without one goals can just slide away

<u>Goal-setting</u>

10 minutes

Athlete will identify which skill she will want to set a goal for. The athlete will then use the SMART goal-setting method to set a goal for a basketball skill.

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Appendix 2

Goal-Setting Interview 1

What basketball skill would you like to improve?

- I want to be able to shoot better
  - o S = shoot more during practice, 50 shots
  - o M = count the number of shots that go in
  - o A = make 25-45 shots (50-90%)
  - o R = self-set
  - o T = reach goal in 2-3 months

Appendix 3

Interview Feedback 1

- What portion of the exercise did you really enjoy?
  - o I thought it was good because I was able to set concrete/definite goals instead of having abstract goals.
- What part of the lesson really dragged or didn't feel useful?
  - o Some of the question was too abstract/vague (Ex. How can you improve?)
- What part of the lesson did you not understand?
  - o I didn't see the point in explaining SMART if we weren't going to specifically use it during the goal-setting portion. Maybe let me know what letter we are on.
- What part of the lesson did you want more of?
  - o It would be nice to have more concrete suggestions from the coach on how to improve performance. Also, having specific details and examples within SMART would also be helpful.
- How could this be better next time?
  - o Work on the negatives I mentioned earlier. It would also be good to explain the purpose of doing the lesson.

Appendix 4

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Lesson Plan 2

Learning Target(s)/Objective(s):

Athlete will learn about the SMART goal-setting method. Athlete will make a goal using the SMART goal-setting method.

Materials:

- Notebook
- Performance profile

Procedures and approximate time

(Time: 20 minutes)

Introduction

5 minutes

Tell athlete the purpose of the interview. Athlete will be asked what skills are need to be a good basketball skills. After naming the skills, the athlete will write the skills onto a performance profile. The athlete will then gauge her skill level for each profile.
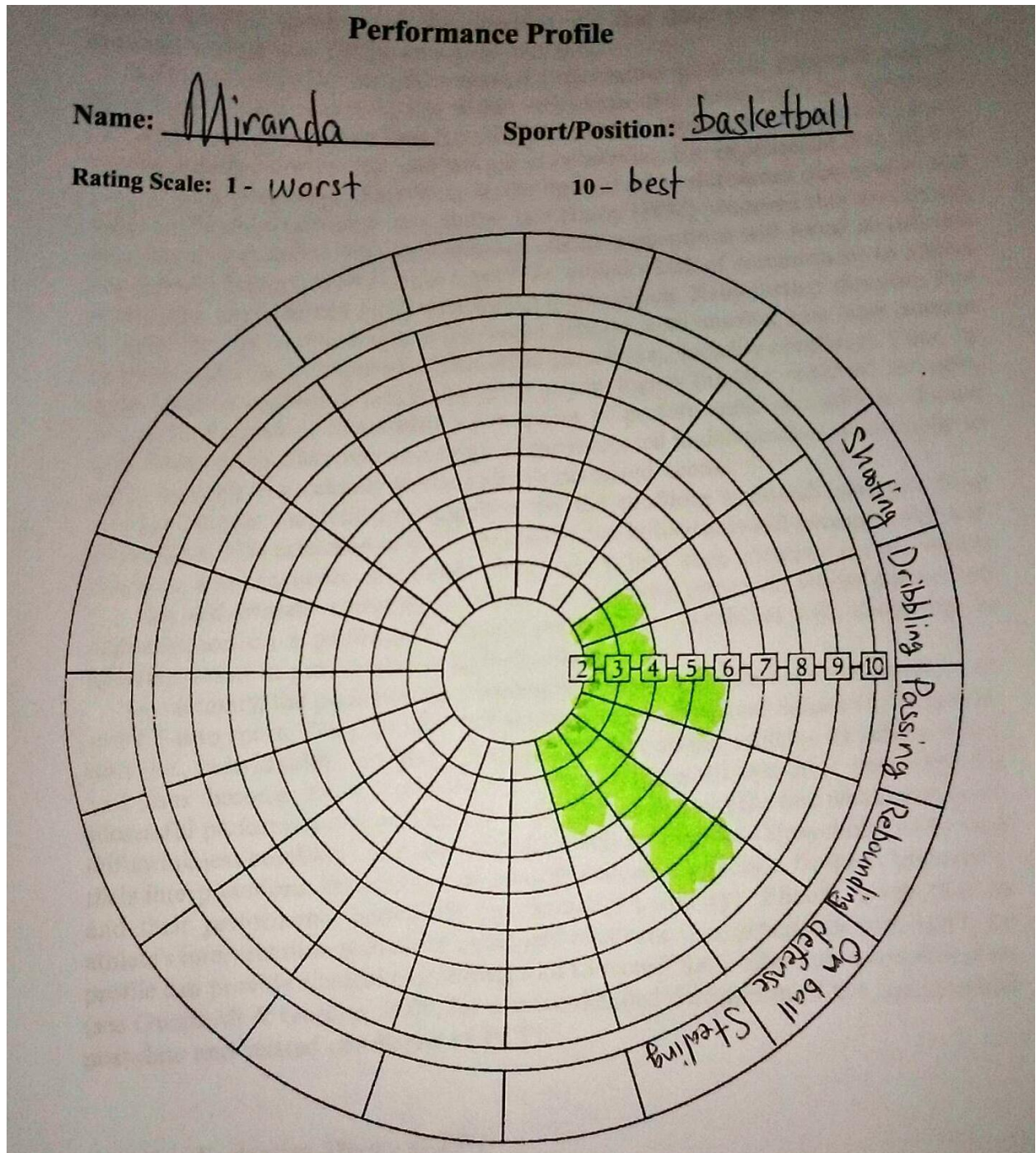
Goal-setting

15 minutes

Athlete will identify which skill she will want to set a goal for. The coach will explain one of the letter of SMART goal-setting and have the athlete give an answer for that letter. After the athlete has finished, then the coach will move on to the next letter of SMART goal-setting where he will explain the letter to the athlete and have her give an answer for that letter. This exchange will continue until all the letters have been completed.

- Explain to athlete S of SMART
    - S = specific = process goal is objective and behavioral/observable
        - It is a specific thing we can do (Ex. BEEF (Balance, Eyes, Elbow, Follow through)
    - Athlete will choose a specific action she can do attain process goal
- Explain to athlete M of SMART
    - M = measurable = process goal has to let us know if we are attaining our goal or not (tracking)

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- Ex. counting the number of shots made, how many shots are made in a time limit, shots made in a specific spot
    - o Athlete will choose how to measure her progress
- Explain to athlete A of SMART
    - o (A) - A = (aggressive but) achievable = process goal should be able to challenge us but should also be achievable and not too easy
        - Ex. target a percentage that is just outside our range for a challenge, but also not so easy that we don't put in good effort
            - Context = NBA players are considered good free throw shooters when they make 80% or more of their free throw shots
    - o Athlete will choose an aggressive but achievable goal
- Explain to athlete R of SMART
    - o R = relevant = process goal should have a personal meaning, this can be done by having the goal be self-set
    - o Athlete will explain why she wants to improve her shooting skill
- Explain to athlete T of SMART
    - o T = time-bound = process goal needs to have a start and finish time, without this the athlete might not have the urgency to attain the goal and let it slip away
    - o Athlete will set a target time for when she wants her goal completed

Appendix 5

Performance profile

Appendix 6

Goal-setting Interview 2

What skill could we set a goal for?

- increase performance in shooting
    - S = use BEEF (Balance, Eyes, Elbow, Follow through) every time when shooting
    - M = count the number of shots made at the free throw, 50 shots taken
    - (A) - A = shoot 50% (make 25 shots)
    - R = self-set, wants to get better because she currently shoots about 20%
    - T = 2 months

Appendix 7

Interview Feedback 2

- Was the lesson better this time? If so, what improved?
    - It was better. The questions were more specific. The steps were broken down and not in one lump like the previous time.
- What could use improvement?
    - I didn't know if this interview was in a vacuum or a follow-up to the previous interview.
- Do you see this as helping you to perform better?
    - If I stick with the goal, then it would.
- What was most helpful to you about this exercise?
    - When coach gave me examples then I had a clear standard of goodness on which to base my answers.