

Chapter 8

Optimizing Performance: Enhancing Readiness Through Psychological Strategies

Iain Aberdeen

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3968-1644>

University of Sunderland, UK

ABSTRACT

This book chapter examines the role of coaching psychology frameworks in athlete performance preparation. Grounded in Aristotle's teachings on holistic development and practical wisdom, the chapter highlights the necessity of fostering psychological readiness alongside physical training to optimise athletic performance. It defines coaching psychology as a systematic approach to enhancing individual wellbeing and goal attainment, emphasising the importance of setting challenging goals, intrinsic motivation, and self-efficacy. The chapter reviews literature that underscores the impact of psychological factors on performance under pressure. Additionally, it discusses how structured performance preparation routines that include psychological strategies are critical for athletes' success. By addressing the influence of coaching interactions and the self-fulfilling prophecy phenomena, the chapter advocates for a comprehensive performance preparation model that integrates psychological insights, ultimately aiming to enhance athletes' competitive readiness and overall performance.

INTRODUCTION

Aristotle's teachings of 'living a flourishing life' can frame the work of coaches around supporting the balanced psychological responses in athletes, whilst his subsequent teachings entitled 'Phronesis' or 'Practical Wisdom' highlight key areas of

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decision-making skills and critical thinking. Aristotle continues in his teachings to foster a need for deliberate, consistent practice to create the formation of habits (Aristotle, 2009). These fundamental teachings from the workings of Aristotle, ‘Golden Mean’ and ‘Eudaimonia’, from around 330BC, can be seen as the philosophical foundations of the importance of a rounded individual from a holistic perspective with a perspective of balance in training, confidence and competitiveness.

Coaching psychology, as defined by Grant (2011), is ‘a branch of psychology that is concerned with the systematic application of the behavioural science of psychology to the enhancement of life experience, work performance and wellbeing for individuals’. Grant further expanded on this, stating that ‘Coaching psychology focuses on facilitating goal attainment’. This highlights the role of coaching psychology in helping individuals achieve their personal and professional goals by applying behavioural and positive psychology principles. The literature review of executive coaching (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001) defines coaching as “A human development process that involves structured, focused interaction and the use of appropriate strategies, tools, and techniques to promote desirable and sustainable change to improve performance and expand individual capabilities.”

Coaching psychology emphasizes the importance of creating clear goals that challenge (Locke & Latham, 2002), support intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and foster self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Grant & Cavanagh (2007) state, ‘Coaches seek to assist their clients to articulate self-congruent goals and aspirations and to work toward their achievement systematically. These goals may be developmental or at the level of performance or the acquisition of specific skills.’ In competitive environments, an athlete’s readiness to perform is wide-ranging, beyond the physical preparation, with a proven need to be psychologically primed for competition. Gould et al. (2009) define psychological preparation as ‘those cognitive, emotional, and behavioural strategies athletes and teams use to arrive at an ideal performance state or condition related to optimal psychological states and peak performance either for competition or practice.’ Gould & Udry (1994) also highlight this, stating, ‘Psychological factors such as mental toughness, focus, and anxiety management play a critical role in athletic performance and can significantly enhance an athlete’s ability to perform under pressure.’

Ensuring an athlete’s performance preparation routine includes psychological mechanisms is crucial to their overall performance; in their study, Anderson et al. (2014) state, ‘athletes acknowledge that best performances are highly dependent on one single factor: their psychological state’. Singer (2002) states, ‘self-paced sports and events in sports allow time for preparing to perform in a stable and predictable situation’, which shows an opportunity for a practiced performance preparation routine to become ingrained in the overall preparation of an athlete. It is seen in Sarkar & Fletcher (2014) that sporting performers, when discussing their environ-

mental demands, identify how aspects of competition preparation, from the physical, mental, technical and tactical, are viewed, at times, as inadequate, inappropriate or arduous. If we validate coach effectiveness through the definition of Côté & Gilbert (2009), 'The consistent application of integrated professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge to improve athletes' competence, confidence, connection, and character in specific coaching context', the links to the multiple frameworks that are used to inform the performance preparation model central to this chapter can be formed. Rupprecht et al. (2024) examined the use of Preperformance Routines in a meta-analysis and concluded that their results supported the benefits of Preperformance Routines in practice.

The original work of Merton (1948) shows how the phenomena of the self-fulfilling prophecy, where the relationship between an athlete's beliefs or future success, can influence their perceptions of their ability and impede their execution of actions. This is further built on by Stukas and Snyder (2016), where they delve into how people's beliefs about others in a social context can influence specific interactions. The awareness of self-fulfilling prophecies is essential to the construction of conversations and awareness of potential bias for the interaction between coaches and athletes, as this knowledge underpins the need for positivity from the coach so as not to detract from the athlete's performance through an unintended remark.

Green S. & Palmer S. (2018) state that "coaching psychology is an applied science and somewhat narrowly focused on the use of knowledge from a specific domain (i.e. behavioural science)" and go further to say that the term "evidence-based coaching" is important as the term suggests that the coaching is based on scientific theory and research and differentiates it from "coaching as usual," which may or may not refer to the underpinning science of coaching psychology.' Reflecting on the above statements, it can be seen that there needs to be a level of theoretical foundations in the delivery of 'coaching' conversations that will allow the 'coach' to facilitate the development of the athlete positively rather than hinder or be fundamentally destructive in their personal growth.

Coaching psychology as an applied tool grounded in evidence-based interventions is becoming ever more prevalent in supporting the enhancement of individual sports performance. This chapter examines how structured coaching psychology methodologies can provide athlete-centred and Goal-orientated coaching within a sports performance context. Innovative approaches can evolve by blending contemporary models such as solution-focused coaching, positive psychology, narrative model, and motivational interviewing with foundational theories such as self-determination theory, cognitive behavioural theory, and goal-setting theory. These approaches can be applied to athlete intervention to address the cognitive, emotional and sociological factors to overcome and navigate the challenges in a performance setting. This can be achieved by framing the athletes 'measure of success' to support a drive towards

intrinsic motivation rather than ‘measuring success’ based on extrinsic factors such as finishing positions, financial rewards or the perception of others. Reduced risk of stress, burnout, and anxiety may occur by linking the athlete’s intrinsic measure of success rather than a multifaceted approach to Goal setting from a coach or other stakeholders’ perspective. The study by Almagro et al. (2020) into perceived performance, intrinsic motivation and adherence found that the satisfaction of the needs for autonomy and relatedness positively predicted intrinsic motivation.

This chapter aims to provide a research-informed examination of the coaching psychology models that can contribute to an athlete’s readiness to perform. It highlights how these models can be adapted to form an athlete-centred framework that aligns with an athlete’s psychological needs to facilitate goal-oriented coaching linked to intrinsic motivation, resilience, and self-reflection.

EMPOWERING ATHLETES: THE INTERPLAY OF SELF-EFFICACY AND AUTONOMY

Central to all the constructs of coaching is the theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997b), which is the belief in one’s ability to execute the necessary actions required to achieve a specific outcome, mainly within challenging or novel situations. Self-efficacy is not only about possessing the required skills but also about having the confidence to apply them, when appropriate, effectively under pressure. Self-efficacy influences how athletes set goals, approach challenges, and respond to setbacks. Crucially, self-efficacy is dynamic and can be evolved through positive experiences, observing peers succeed in challenging environments, receiving positive feedback, and controlling emotions to maintain focus and composure during performance.

Coaching psychology combines constructivist and humanistic approaches to create a framework for effective problem-solving and individual growth. The humanistic approach (Maslow, 1968) emphasizes self-actualization, where individuals realize their full potential, creativity and personal growth. This is underpinned by the hierarchy of needs and how this influences motivation and allows a journey from basic needs to self-actualization, which is central to the outcomes of performance preparation conversations and the need for self-exploration. This is further highlighted by Yao and Kabir (2024), who suggest that individuals are motivated to achieve positive functioning and development. This is fostered through the role of the therapist or coach by creating a non-judgmental environment that allows open and honest exploration. From a constructivist approach, the Zone of Proximal Development theory (Vygotsky, 1978), highlights that learning occurs through social engagement, which can be the dialogue between athlete and coach and collaborative sense-making. With a coach being able to help the athlete identify their current level

of ability, they can further support their growth by guiding them, or scaffolding, their learning and decision-making through the relevant use of progressive challenges to foster self-efficacy. Wood et al. (1976) show this might involve providing strategies, feedback, or resources, and the goal is for the athlete to eventually internalize these strategies, enabling them to perform the task independently in the future as they are developing the core skills needed to move from the scaffolded facilitation to the self-decision making of autonomy.

Building on self-efficacy and autonomy, it is worth reviewing Experiential Learning Theory, Kolb (1984) about athlete development. This theory emphasizes the role of experience in learning and the individual's journey through a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. For athletes, this process is vital in their development. They continually practice, reflect on their performance, and analyze what was successful and unsuccessful to allow them to adapt their approach to maximize future performances. This allows the athletes to deepen their knowledge of their performance and adjust their strategies appropriately to support their ability to face future challenges. Similarly, Gibbs's Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988) includes the stages of Description, Feelings, Evaluation, Analysis, Conclusion, and Action Plan. For athletes, this model encourages a systematic reflection on performance, which supports their learning from their experiences and subsequently adapts their strategies for future events. The reflective process of Gibbs leads to a deeper understanding of the individual athlete's actions and decision-making whilst promoting continuous learning, adaptation, and personal growth.

NAVIGATING PERFORMANCE PRESSURE: UNDERSTANDING ITS IMPACT ON ATHLETES

Performance pressure within a sporting context can be both internal or externally generated and needs to be managed appropriately to allow athletes to compete in critical situations within competitive environments. In previous research across sports, it can be accepted that high pressure increases the likelihood of performance failure. For example, Lewis & Linder (1997) examined golf putting in an experimental setting and concluded that the performance was worse when participants were pressured. They also examined adding a distractionary task to the golf putting task, where the participants with the secondary task outperformed those with a single task focus. The secondary task result is explained as too much focus on the single task execution, customarily performed automatically when trying to perform well in high-pressure situations. R. C. Jackson et al. (2006) examined skilled motor behaviour in hockey under high-pressure situations. They found a detrimental

effect of skill-focused attention and a facilitative effect of dual-task conditions. Wang et al. (2004) examined basketball players in free throws across low- and high-pressure scenarios; in high-pressure scenarios, it was concluded that athletes in the high-pressure scenario experienced higher levels of state anxiety. Bühren & Träger (2022) compared handball penalties and their relationship to performance under pressure, concluding that the more confident player will perform better under tournament incentives.

Performance pressure can be separated into distinct elements that interconnect to define how an athlete will respond in an environment of heightened challenge. To allow adequate performance preparation, it is important to acknowledge the role that these elements play in relation to performance pressure. The elements that interconnect are mood, anxiety, and stress.

Lane & Terry (2000) defined the mood in the sporting context as a set of feelings, ephemeral in nature, varying in intensity and duration, and usually involving more than one emotion. Terry (n.d.) stated that emotions are seen as relatively brief but intense experiences activated by cognitive appraisals of situational factors, and mood is generally conceptualized as having lower intensity, longer duration, and more diffuse origins. Mood can positively and negatively impact sporting performance, but it is all relative to the athlete. As such, the influence of mood states on individuals needs to be accounted for. A positive mood can enhance motivation, energy, and confidence, whereas a negative mood can impair performance through frustration, self-doubt or low confidence.

Anxiety in sports can be seen as a negative emotional state with feelings of worry and nervousness. Spielberger (1972) stated there are different facets within Anxiety, which can be defined as Trait Anxiety and State Anxiety, with trait being a stable characteristic and how an individual will respond in a situation and state as a transitory emotion characterized by physiological arousal and feelings of apprehension and tension. Anxiety is further unpicked to be split into two types of Anxiety: Cognitive Anxiety and Somatic Anxiety. Robazza & Bortoli (2007) defined Cognitive Anxiety as ‘negative expectations and cognitive concerns about oneself, the situation at hand, and potential consequences and Somatic anxiety was conceptualized as the perception of one’s physiological arousal’. This research went further to describe the relationship between cognitive and somatic Anxiety on performance, where cognitive Anxiety is hypothesized to have a negative linear relationship with performance; somatic Anxiety is hypothesized to have a quadratic relationship with performance. Cognitive Anxiety may manifest itself as concerns with a negative evaluation, fear of failure and preoccupation with an outcome.

In contrast, Somatic Anxiety may manifest itself physically with sweating, trembling, and increased heart rate. For example, a pistol shooter in a competition may underperform if concerned about the score outcome through a negative linear

relationship with performance. This contrasts with a heightened level of arousal, which helps with focus through an inverted U-shape relationship, with performance being towards optimal levels.

McGrath E (1970) defines stress as a substantial imbalance between demand, physical and/or psychological, and response capability under conditions where failure to meet that demand has important consequences. McGrath proposed a four-stage model of stress that consisted of environmental demand, perception of demand, stress response and behavioural consequences. In the research by Gould et al. (1993), they summarize the dimensions of stress-causing factors in National Champion Figure Skaters as ‘The most often mentioned concerns focused on (a) competitive anxiety and self-doubts, which included specific stressors such as fear of failure, lack of confidence, and worries about performing well; (b) dealing with various environmental demands such as the media, increased time commitments, and the need to finance training; (c) high-performance standards and expectations; and (d) significant-other relationship issues’. This links to further research into the stress experiences identified by Pensgaard & Duda (2003) in their research into sixty-one Olympic athletes from Norway and Denmark who competed in the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, which reported four key categories of stress, namely performance-related (expectation driven), psycho-social (negative thoughts), external (other competitors, judges) and injury (not fully recovered). From the research by Tossici et al. (2024), stress was divided into eustress; a positive perspective and activation of the body’s stress response and distress; a negative perspective within the body disrupting its homeostasis and burnout resulting in the depletion of the body’s adaptive resources. Stress is not necessarily harmful but can sometimes aid performance and recovery. It needs to be monitored to provide optimal performance outcomes and ensure an athlete’s health.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF PERFORMANCE PREPARATION: INSIGHTS FOR COACHES AND ATHLETES

The foundational theories that underpin the performance preparation framework that this chapter will introduce are Self-Determination Theory, Self-Regulation Theory, and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. These theories provide insight into enhancing an athlete’s performance through research-informed methodologies.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000b) focuses on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to drive an individual’s focus on psychological growth.

SDT posits that individuals are more likely to thrive and achieve their goals when their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. Autonomy refers to the feeling of control and choice over one's actions, competence is the sense of mastery and effectiveness in one's pursuits, and relatedness is the feeling of connection and belonging with others. When these needs are satisfied, athletes are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, meaning they engage in sport for the inherent satisfaction and enjoyment it brings, rather than for external rewards or pressures. This intrinsic drive leads to greater persistence, engagement, and overall well-being. SDT allows athletes who are aligned with their goals and who are intrinsically motivated to make better choices and pursue skill mastery. Through the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, individuals can experience enhanced motivation, performance and well-being, thus maintaining longer-term engagement with the sport due to self-accomplishment rather than extrinsically motivated satisfaction. Ntoumanis (2001) concluded in his study into Physical Education pupils that those with higher autonomy and competence received greater satisfaction from their sport and had a higher level of persistence. The role of the coach towards fostering SDT development can be seen in the research of Rocchi et al. (2020), where they identified that when coaches engage in interpersonal behaviors that support their athlete's need for autonomy (provide opportunities to have choice), competence (give helpful feedback), and relatedness (demonstrate warmth), it leads to increased self-determined motivation.

Self-Regulation Theory

Self-Regulation Theory (Zimmerman, 2000) shows a cyclical model of forethought, performance and self-reflection and the interdependence of these processes. The dysfunction of self-regulation is highlighted as there is generally a reliance on reactive rather than proactive self-regulation methods, which detracts from learning. The cyclic process translates to how an athlete analyses, controls and reflects on their behaviors, moods and thoughts to achieve the desired outcome. Self-regulation impacts the key areas of self-monitoring, self-evaluation and behavioral adjustment within performance preparation. Central to the process is the creation of realistic goals and the process of Goal shifting from process to outcome at crucial performance stages coupled with self-recording that is relevant to the Goal (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2005). By committing to the self-regulation process through repeated application of the key cyclical principles, the more repeatable the performance outcomes become (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2012).

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive-based Therapy (CBT) (Beck, 1976) examines the interactions of thoughts, behaviors, emotions, and positions, stating that positive thinking can lead to positive outcomes. In contrast, negative thinking can be destructive and lead to distress. CBT is a method of supporting athletes to manage anxiety and enhance focus by using techniques such as cognitive restructuring, mental imagery, and relaxation. Cognitive restructuring involves identifying and challenging irrational or unhelpful thought patterns and replacing them with more realistic and adaptive ones. Mental imagery, or visualization, allows athletes to mentally rehearse successful performances, thereby building confidence and preparing for various scenarios. Relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation, help athletes manage physiological arousal and reduce somatic anxiety. Smith et al. (2007) researched cognitive training for coaches in delivering positive reinforcement, mistake-contingent encouragement, corrective instruction and sound technical instruction. The results of this study indicated that through a short coach education program, changes could influence an athlete's trait anxiety over a sporting season at both a somatic and trait level. From the research into archers, Robazza et al. (1998) implied that both sports psychologists and coaches can support athletes in identifying their optimal arousal levels for their best performance by modifying arousal systematically and repeatedly and by measuring the metrics of the consequence of these on performance and outcome.

Coaching psychology uses the interaction between cognitive, emotional and social mechanisms to create an environment for individual development and growth, which holds its base in the previously mentioned foundational theories and scaffolds these with contemporary theories. These contemporary theories allow individual growth by building on the ability to identify strengths, reflect on performance and manage expectations based on realistic outcomes.

CONTEMPORARY COACHING MODELS

Solution Focused Coaching is based on the principles of Solution Focused Brief Therapy (de Shazer et al., 1986), where the focus is on the client or athlete in a sports context and is directed towards the athletes' strengths and available resources rather than previous outcomes. The solution-focused approach looks forward to what the athlete wants to achieve and the journey towards this outcome, underpinned by their strengths, focusing on fostering self-efficacy. The coach's role in building achievable

goals is to facilitate clarity and support the creation of solutions for the individual athlete while ensuring the goals are formed around manageable steps.

Positive Psychology (de Shazer et al., 1986) shifts the focus of psychology back to its original missions of making life productive and fulfilling and identifying and nurturing high talent rather than the narrow mission of treating mental illness that evolved following the World Wars. They went further to state that psychology is not just the study of weakness and damage but also the study of strength and virtue, and the field of positive psychology is about valued subjective experiences, hope and optimism and flow and happiness. Hodges & Clifton (2004) further build on positive psychology by introducing strength-based development and defined a strength as 'the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity.' Through a process of identifying talent, integration, and behavior change, individuals define talents as strong points, share them with others and then build on these with the necessary skills and knowledge before explaining their behaviors linked to their talents and finally tying their success to their themes of talents.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) introduces his concept of Flow, which is strongly connected to, and can be defined through, positive psychology due to its contribution to performance and well-being. Flow state balances the relationship between a task perceived challenge and the athlete's ability or skill to enable a flowing performance. Flow is defined as the complete immersion, focus and enjoyment of an activity, sometimes referred to as 'being in the zone'. Although some use these interchangeably, they are not necessarily the same. The specificity of performance preparation is the balance the coach can facilitate between the challenge/skill perception of the athlete and how these are framed. Setting goals is crucial to the flow state as it can frame the challenge as too high, which can result in Anxiety or too low, which can result in boredom. Using strength-based feedback, coaches can foster the development of the emotional conditions that make Flow state accessible (S. A. Jackson & Kimiecik, 2008).

Motivational interviewing (MI) is defined by Miller & Rollnick (2023) as a particular way of talking with people about change and growth to strengthen their motivation and commitment they also highlight a further link that underpins psychological performance preparation, SDT and self-efficacy theory through 'the spirit of MI starts from this latter strengths focused premise, that people already have within much of what is needed.... and the implicit message in MI is you have what you need, and we will find it.' MI is a structured, goal-orientated approach that utilizes communication skills to address the intrinsic needs of an athlete, define their commitment to behavioral change, and strengthen their motivation rather than external motivators. One of the key factors that drives MI is the journey towards autonomy facilitated through non-confrontational conversations. The use of coaching conversations to create intrinsic motivation has a high level of importance and influence,

which is shown in (Vallerand, 2003) where they state, 'Although many factors may impact athletes' intrinsic and self-determined extrinsic motivation, the coach-athlete relationship is one of the most important influences on athletes'. Chatzisarantis & Hagger (2007) go further to state 'the behaviors of the coach, which can foster intrinsic motivation if they are autonomy supportive or undermine it if they are controlling', highlighting the need for coaches to prepare athletes to ensure the key messaging is centered on the athletes needs and not theirs, the organization or other stakeholders. The relationship between the athlete and the coach can be seen as a strong interpersonal relationship and, as such, links to 'MI primarily facilitates the building of an interpersonal relationship between practitioner and client and aims to resolve ambivalence towards behavioral change.' Mack et al. (2021).

From the perspective of Goal Setting Theory, the conclusion of Locke & Latham (2002) 'The effects of goal setting are very reliable. Failures to replicate them are usually due to errors, such as not matching the goal to the performance measure, not providing feedback, not getting goal commitment, not measuring the person's personal (self-set) goals, not conveying task knowledge, setting a performance goal when a specific high-learning goal is required' shows that the principle of goal setting is complex and requires skillful implementation to influence the performance outcomes of an individual. Goal setting is more than defining simple targets; the goals must be aligned to relevant and realistic performance evaluations, be athlete-led and have a feedback mechanism. This theory leads us to understand that to enhance motivation reliably, the structured approach of creating clear yet challenging goals, with a subsequent feedback mechanism. In contrast, overlooking any of these individual stages of goal setting can limit the benefit of the framework and lead to broader motivational issues. The meta-analysis by Mento et al. (1987) concluded that the efficacy of combining specific challenging goals with feedback versus hard goals without subsequent feedback showed support for the former and that there was a definitive link between the positive outcome of goal setting and feedback. Crucial to the creation of this specific framework of goal setting, due to the athlete/coach relationships, is the role of the coach and their understanding of the process due to the way they intentionally or unintentionally influence the athlete and their relationship with the process of goal setting, (Weinberg, 2010).

Sarkar & Fletcher (2014) show that the framing of thoughts, as well as feelings and actions, are crucial to sports performance. 'These constructive cognitive reactions promoted facilitative responses that appeared to be firmly embedded in taking personal responsibility for one's thoughts, feelings, and actions. In turn, positive responses led to the realization of optimal sports performance.' From the research into golfers by Freeman & Rees (2009), it is shown that the levels of external support in the framing of the competition can lead to a revaluation of the perceived level of challenge, which allows for a reduction in the levels of stress, 'Through receiving

help and support, an individual may appraise that he/she now has the resources to cope with a situation, leading to more positive reappraisal.'

THE INTERPLAY OF COACHING MODELS: ENHANCING THE COACH/ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

From a coaching psychology perspective, there are numerous models and frameworks that have been developed across multiple aspects of personal and professional development, which have various focuses: goal setting and action, solutions focused, and client and relationship centered, behavior change, exploration and reflection, behavioral scaling and lastly empowerment. Whilst some models could be defined as fitting into one focus area, the majority fit across multiple focuses, which defines the complexity of the coach/athlete relationship, and the underlying constructs of the models used. The frameworks can be adapted and are flexible to suit the needs of the coach/coachee scenario to foster the support needed. From a goal setting perspective, the majority of the models look towards setting appropriate goals and the subsequent achievement of these for individual growth whilst also identifying strengths and past experiences that have had positive outcomes to build the foundations of self-efficacy and resilience.

The GROW Model

The GROW model (Whitmore, 1980) guides individuals through goal setting and problem-solving through its four stages via its acronym GROW – Goal, Reality, Options, Will. Breaking this down into its parts, the Goal involves clarifying the desired outcome of what the coachee strives to achieve in the short and the long term. Reality examines where the coachee is at the current point about their goal, highlighting any limitations, obstacles and resources, both past and current, that can support the way forward. Options identify possible strategies to move forward towards the goal, addressing as wide a range of ways possible, both conventional and potentially unconventional. Will, sometimes phrased as way forward, defines the way forward through an action plan of the specific steps the coachee will take to achieve their goal whilst ensuring accountability on the part of the coachee. The GROW model is a straightforward framework rooted in cognitive behavioral theory and a clear and practical application method. However, its narrow goal perspective can limit it, and it is not one of the broader holistic approaches to long-term development.

The CLEAR Model

The CLEAR, Contracting, Listening, Exploring, Action, Review model developed by Hawkins & Smith (2013) is a framework for coaching conversations that establishes positive communication and builds the coach and coachee relationship. Contracting defines the relationship between the coach and the coachee with the boundaries of the coaching relationship clarified along with the expected outcomes, responsibilities and roles through a mutual understanding. Listening is based on active listening, where the coach creates space for the coachee to share experiences and build trust for the dialogue to deepen. Exploring investigates, through a deeper reflective questioning approach, the current areas of challenge or conflict the coachee is experiencing, along with potential solutions. Action is the collaborative process of defining a step-by-step action plan by placing accountability on the coachee for their defined practical actions. Review is the process of reflection undertaken by the coach and coachee to monitor the action plan and make adjustments towards long-term improvements. The CLEAR model is rooted in humanistic psychology and offers an adaptable, reflective approach to long-term development; it emphasizes a personalized coaching approach, with both the coach and coachee aligned with the aspirations, although due to its time demands may lack the immediacy of results that a goal-driven approach such as GROW may bring.

The OSKAR Model

The OSKAR model (P. Jackson & McKergow, 2007), Outcome, establishing clear and specific sessional goals, Scaling, using numerical scales to assess the current areas and areas of development, Know-how, identifies the coachee's existing skill, knowledge and system of support, Affirm and Action, acknowledging what is working well and define the actions going forward, Review, assessing progress to ensure continuous improvement and the accountability of the coachee. The OSKAR model uses the current strengths of the coachee to look forward and create sustainable action plans rather than unpicking previous experiences. Although using this approach, there is an overreliance on the individual insight from the coachee, and it has a potential narrow focus which can overlook underlying issues and miss emotional or psychological barriers.

The Wheel of Life and Profiling Wheel

The 'Wheel of Life' coaching model is attributed to Paul J. Meyer and is referenced widely across coaching psychology texts (Byrne, 2005). It is used as a self-assessment tool to break down areas of life in the form of a wheel. Individuals assess

their satisfaction in each area between the spokes, creating a graphical representation of areas of improvement and strengths from a holistic perspective. There are some similarities between the Wheel of Life and the Profiling Wheel, Butler & Hardy (1992), although they are designed for fundamentally different tasks. The Wheel of Life is a broad overview of a general life balance. In contrast, the Profiling Wheel is a targeted self-assessment tool that originates in enhancing an athlete's development by identifying the attributes or competencies an athlete has or does not have for success, which allows for the creation of athlete-specific development plans.

BRIDGING THE GAPS IN ATHLETE PREPARATION: THE PACT MODEL FOR PERFORMANCE COACHING

The widespread use of established coaching models such as GROW, CLEAR, and OSKAR in lifestyle, executive, and business coaching is well-documented; however, their application in performance preparation coaching within sports remains underdeveloped. While some coaches and practitioners integrate elements from various coaching psychology frameworks, there are potential gaps that could be filled to enhance athlete preparation. Many of the current coaching psychology frameworks lack the psychological depth to promote the development of mental resilience, intrinsic motivation, emotional regulation, and drive towards cultivating athlete autonomy. This highlights the need for a holistic framework that combines coaching psychology's structured conversations and goal setting with a framework with foundations focused on supporting athletes' mental health, emotional intelligence, and adaptability. The PACT model, Purpose, Awareness, Challenge, Thrive bridges this divide by embedding core coaching psychology principles into a structured, research-informed approach that supports athlete performance preparation while fostering long-term success and personal growth. Through the four phases of the PACT model, an athlete embarks on a developmental journey that is not strictly cyclical but instead spirals. This spiral allows for a dynamic process where growth can narrow or broaden depending on the athlete's evolving needs, fluctuating performance levels, or shifts in competitive demands, ensuring continuous and adaptive development over time.

Figure 1. Diagram of the PACT model for athlete preparation



The PACT model is designed to guide athletes through a dynamic process that builds on experience and continues to evolve, both within the context of each event and in their broader athletic development. The spiral emphasizes continuous growth, adaptation, and reflection, ensuring that athletes become more effective and mentally prepared for every event following their performance in previous events.

Purpose: Defining the Athlete's Specific Purpose of the Event

The Purpose phase of the PACT Model establishes a foundational drive for athletes by connecting their values to their performance goals. By defining purpose on both a macro level (longer-term performance goals) and a micro level (specific event objectives), athletes create a clear sense of direction and support the growth of intrinsic motivation. This dual-purpose approach fosters commitment, resilience, and clarity, helping athletes focus even when facing challenges. Athletes supported through the Purpose phase are better equipped to navigate setbacks, maintain motivation, and experience deeper fulfillment in their sporting journey.

Purpose (Athlete's Value)

The purpose must critically align the athlete's values and long-term objectives with the event. Why are they participating in this competition, and how does it fit into their broader goals and growth as athletes?

Purpose (Event-Specific) Value

Having the athlete clarify the specific reasoning for competing in the upcoming event and its relevance within the long-term development plan directs scaffolds the intrinsic motivation rather than perceived external influences. This phase emphasizes understanding why the event matters and supports setting straightforward, concrete, athlete-aligned process or outcome goals (e.g., achieving a personal best, improving a specific skill, or competing with focus and composure). This helps athletes focus on their immediate tasks and manage expectations that are not reliant on the performance of other competitors.

This dual purpose (event-specific and personal) creates motivation and a sense of meaning behind their participation.

Example Practice

Encourage athletes to write down their goals for the event and align them with what they want to achieve within the competition and how these fit into their longer-term development plan and experiential learning. These goals can evolve with each new event in the spiral, growing as the athlete progresses.

Awareness: Measuring Success and Self-Awareness

The Awareness phase in the PACT model ensures that athletes view success from a broader holistic perspective, emphasizing both process-driven measures alongside self-awareness development. This dual approach strengthens athletes' ability to reflect on and regulate their performance, creating a sustainable framework for long-term growth and psychological well-being. Through awareness of self that is generated through individual reflection, coaching feedback, and mental training, athletes can build resilience, stay motivated, and perform consistently under pressure.

Success Measurement

Athletes must assess how success will be measured in the event. This phase encourages athletes to focus on appropriate indicators of success that are not solely outcome-based (such as winning, making finals, or specific placings) but can also include process-focused metrics, like delivery of technical points, consistency of actions, process adherence, tactical decision-making, adaptability under pressure, or personal growth.

Self-Awareness

Alongside the appropriate success measurement, athletes develop self-awareness of their mental and emotional states. This includes self-analysis of pre-competition nerves, identification of positive and negative thought patterns, tracking emotional responses, thought-action links, somatic feedback recognition, adaptation to changing conditions, and behavioral adjustments.

Example Practice

Guide athletes through pre-event self-reflection, helping them identify what success looks like (e.g., completing the race with a positive mindset) and using tools like journals or mental check-ins to assess emotional and physical readiness.

Challenge: Framing the Competition in the Correct Manner

The challenge phase of the PACT Model is to support athletes in reframing the competition as a valuable opportunity for growth rather than an event that is stressful and one to be feared. This phase encourages athletes to face challenges head-on with a mindset focused on improvement and development. By adapting how challenges are presented, athletes can better understand that obstacles are to be valued in their longer-term development and should not be seen as unfavorable. By supporting an athlete to overcome nerves, fine-tuning performance under pressure, or tackling more significant mental barriers, the Challenge phase empowers athletes to grow through adversity and strengthen their adaptability.

Contextualizing the Competition

This phase is about framing the competition appropriately for the athlete's age, stage and development needs. For younger athletes or those in the early stages of development, the competition may focus on learning and experience. In contrast, for more advanced athletes, it may center on performance goals or expand the level of challenge by creating a level of discomfort. Athletes in this stage focus on what they must do during the competition, frame it as an opportunity to perform, and appropriately approach obstacles as part of their growth process. Framing the competition supports the athlete in perceiving the challenges not as threats but as an opportunity to improve. The skill for the coach is to ensure the framing of the competitive event is aligned to the developmental needs of the athlete and is sufficiently explicit to ensure clarity for the athlete in how it is positioned regarding their longer term journey.

Adapting to Developmental Needs

In the Challenge stage, it is critical to ensure that expectations are adjusted so they are age-appropriate or suited to the athlete's specific developmental stage. For instance, a younger athlete may need guidance on handling nerves and maintaining fun, while an elite athlete may focus on overcoming mental barriers or maintaining peak performance under pressure.

Example Practice

To effectively reframe the competition, coaches can tailor their discussions to the athlete's developmental stage, helping them see the challenge positively. For younger athletes or those in the early stages of development, a coach may use an emphasis to frame the competition as an opportunity to gain experience, try developing skills in a competitive setting, or learn how to manage basic competitive emotions, such as nerves or excitement. For more advanced athletes, the challenge can be framed as an opportunity, within competition, to challenge mental toughness, tactical decision-making, or strategic execution. Coaches can guide athletes to view competitions to explore their limits, improve performance under pressure, and learn to adapt their approach when faced with unexpected situations.

Thrive: Sustaining Growth, Learning, and Moving Forward

The Thrive phase of the PACT Model is focused on ensuring that athletes continue their journey of growth and development, regardless of the performance outcome of the event. Thrive is grounded in reflecting on experiences, performing to the best of your ability, and moving forward with a continuous improvement mindset. By integrating a reflective lens into their process, athletes learn from each experience and, therefore, are encouraged to adapt their strategies for future challenges. The Thrive phase fosters an individual commitment to personal growth, allowing athletes to navigate successes and setbacks with a focus on long-term progress.

Thrive (Reflection and Performance)

This phase encourages athletes to reflect critically on their performances, identifying what went well and any necessary improvement areas. By reflecting on both process and outcome, athletes can review every experience to refine their technical and tactical skill base and enhance their psychological skills. Focusing on understanding the necessary level of performance reinforces the need for athletes to stay grounded in their ability, adjust tactics, and stay focused on their plan even

when faced with unexpected circumstances. This builds their ability to perform under competitive conditions and strengthens their overall development as athletes.

Thrive (Resilience and Moving Forward)

A key aspect of thriving is developing the ability to assess realistic success and move forward from each experience. This phase highlights the importance of resilience in learning from both experiences that go well and those that do not go as well. Athletes are encouraged to view every event as a part of their developmental journey, where success is measured not only by outcomes but by the progress made along the way. Moving forward highlights reflection as a tool for continued improvement while maintaining motivation to pursue future challenges.

Example Practice

Encourage athletes to integrate a post-event reflection into their routine, where performance is assessed, emotional responses and triggers are highlighted, and any changes in mental focus during the competition. This practice allows athletes to identify growth opportunities and set new goals based on their reflections, allowing them to shift their focus to upcoming competitions and continue progressing along their development path.

Connecting the Dots: How the PACT Model Embeds Key Psychological Principles in Coaching

The PACT model integrates principles from well-established broad psychological as well as focused sports psychology frameworks, providing a holistic and structured approach to preparing athletes for competitive events. Below are the connections between PACT and some key psychological theories:

Purpose (Intrinsic Motivation and Goal Setting)

Developed by Deci & Ryan (1985), SDT emphasizes intrinsic motivation and how it is fostered by autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the Purpose phase, athletes clarify their purpose and goals, which resonates with the focus of SDT on intrinsic motivation. By setting meaningful, personally relevant goals for the event (instead of merely external rewards), athletes are more likely to experience autonomous motivation and increased engagement. Goal Setting Theory (Locke & Latham, 1990) highlights how clear, challenging, and specific goals lead to improved performance. The Purpose phase of the PACT model directly taps into goal-setting

principles, encouraging athletes to define what success looks like in the context of an event, aligned with their personal and competitive aspirations. Goal setting is crucial for focus and motivation.

Awareness (Self-Awareness, Measuring Success)

Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT)

This model focuses on the role of thoughts in influencing emotions and behaviors. The Awareness phase of the PACT model aligns with CBT's emphasis on identifying and reframing negative thoughts, particularly those that emerge during competition. For example, if an athlete has self-doubt or anxiety before a race, the Awareness phase could help them replace these thoughts with more positive, performance-enhancing beliefs, drawing on the principles outlined by Beck (1976).

Developed by Kabat-Zinn & Hanh (2009), Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) helps individuals become more aware of their thoughts, feelings, and physiological responses in the present moment and was further reported in the study by Goldin & Gross (2010), where they concluded 'MBSR-related changes in attention processes may modify habitual reactivity in the context of negative self-beliefs'. The Awareness phase in the PACT model could incorporate mindfulness practices to help athletes stay grounded and focused, particularly under stress during competition. It is important to appreciate the context of MBSR as it is relative to the needs of the athlete based on the necessary levels of arousal to perform at their optimal level; some may need to reduce their levels of arousal, whereas others may need to raise their levels of arousal (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908).

The Awareness phase involves defining what success looks like. This might include process-based goals (e.g., technical execution, mental focus) instead of outcome-based goals (e.g., winning). In sports psychology, athletes' perceptions of success and failure are critical (Weiner, 1985). This is informed by attribution theory, where athletes' perceptions of control and effort impact their motivation and resilience.

Challenge (Framing Competition Appropriately)

Mental toughness refers to an athlete's ability to persist through adversity and remain focused on long-term goals, even under pressure, and this is defined in the Mental Toughness and Resilience Framework, Clough P.J. et al. (2002). The Challenge Phase directly addresses how athletes frame competition and manage adversity. Resilience is key here—athletes must be mentally prepared to face setbacks (like mistakes or unfavorable conditions) and continue pursuing their goals.

Developmental Models of Sport Psychology

These models emphasize the importance of age and developmental stage in sport psychology. The Challenge phase of the PACT model is aligned with these ideas, as it strives to appropriately frame competitions to meet the athlete's age, developmental level, and skill stage. This ensures the challenge is neither viewed as unachievable nor too trivial, enhancing engagement and skill growth and linking to the appropriate levels of arousal, (Wylleman et al., 2004).

Thrive (Reflection and Moving Forward)

Positive psychology (Seligman, 2011) emphasizes strengths, well-being, and personal growth. The Thrive phase draws heavily from positive psychology, encouraging athletes to focus on their personal growth after a competition, regardless of the outcome. Reflection in the Thrive phase allows athletes to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement, supporting a mindset of continuous development.

Athletes often face setbacks, such as losses, injuries, or disappointing performances. The Thrive phase, focusing on reflection and moving forward, aligns with posttraumatic growth, (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), where individuals learn and grow from adversity and build resilience and psychological strength after challenges.

From Novice to Expert: Integrating the Dreyfus Model Within the PACT Framework

The Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980) and the P.A.C.T. Model (Purpose, Awareness, Challenge, Thrive) share a common focus on the athlete's progression and growth, but they approach it from different perspectives. The Purpose phase in the PACT model resonates with the early stages of the Dreyfus model, where athletes, such as novices and advanced beginners, need clear goals and structured guidance to form their initial understanding of performance. As athletes develop through the Competent stage, their self-awareness increases, aligning with the PACT model's Awareness phase, where they start recognizing and evaluating their strengths and weaknesses. When athletes reach the Proficient stage, they are better equipped to handle Challenges automatically and intuitively, much like the mindset cultivated in the PACT model. Finally, at the Expert stage, athletes exhibit a high level of mastery, reflecting the Thrive phase, where they seamlessly integrate reflection and learning into their performance, handling setbacks with resilience and moving forward. The Dreyfus Model complements the PACT Model by offering a developmental lens, showing how athletes' increasing skill levels enable them to navigate each phase with greater autonomy and effectiveness.

Building on Experience: The Spiral Journey of Purpose, Awareness, Challenge and Thrive

The spiral structure of the PACT model emphasizes that athletes do not simply revisit the same steps before each event; instead, they build upon each iteration as they gain experience and insight. As the athlete progresses through their career, they revisit Purpose, Awareness, Challenge, and Thrive at higher levels of complexity and performance, which is initially guided by the coach but subsequently becomes athlete-led with the coach as a reflective tool.

Purpose Evolves

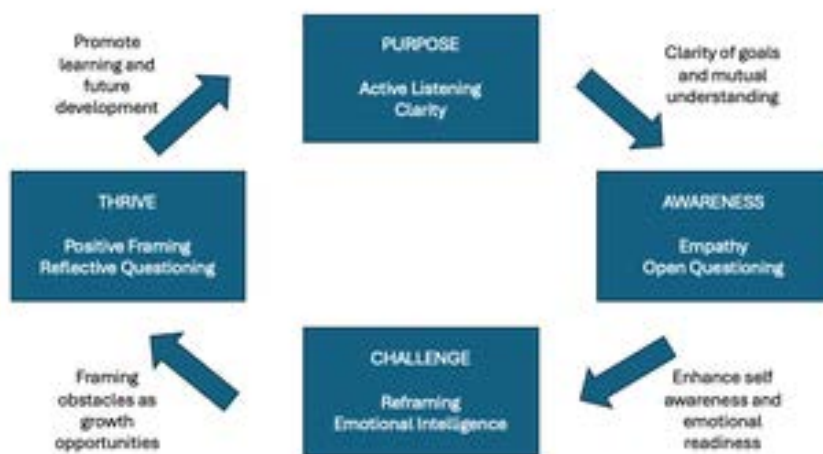
At first, an athlete's purpose might be simple (e.g., performing well in an early-career competition), but over time, it can become more strategic and aligned with deeper values (e.g., influencing others, contributing to the community, or improving performance). Awareness deepens: Athletes will constantly revisit how they measure success, with results not being a key metric but having more of a broader holistic focus that includes mental resilience, consistency, and adaptability. Through this, self-awareness also evolves, moving from external feedback to internally generated reflective practice to assess where the competitive experience fits into the broader picture. Challenges become more complex: The athlete's ability to frame each competition appropriately will become more nuanced, allowing them to set realistic expectations and prepare appropriately for increasingly difficult circumstances. Thrive becomes more sophisticated: Thriving is not just about surviving or performing well in a single event but ensuring long-term development, incorporating continuous improvement, and embracing setbacks as part of the growth process.

Each spiral represents an opportunity for the athlete to grow in preparation, mentally mature, and evolve in their sport. Through the spiral nature, with an emphasis on dynamic flexibility, the athlete's journey is not linear; they return to each phase with greater depth and focus, allowing them to adjust as they move through different stages of their development. Resilience and Recovery: After a competition, athletes can reflect on their performance, extract lessons, and quickly apply them to future events. The spiral ensures they move on quickly, without lingering on past mistakes, fostering mental resilience.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR SUCCESS: THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN THE PACT MODEL

In the research from Bachkirova and Borrington (2019), they state that ‘coaching starts before it starts’. This refers to the readiness of the coachee to the coaching process and, therefore, the necessity of the quality of contracting. Although contracting is implicit within most sports coaching relationships, it is still a critical stage of communicating and understanding with pre-competition preparation conversations. Getting the balance right between the level of structure of the contracting and the level of flexibility is essential to allow the boundaries to evolve as the coaching relationships evolve whilst still allowing the necessary level of structure to ensure the coaching focus is at the center. Clearly defining what the athlete wants to achieve and how the coach will support this learning through coaching ensures that both are aligned in how the relationship will work and having a shared understanding of the goals will lead to more effective contracting (Grant, 2012). Within the contract, the level of accountability for the coach holding the athlete accountable for their learning (Griffiths et al., 2009) is balanced with the coachee holding themselves accountable for completing tasks, goal setting and reflective work. Drake (2011) suggests that coaching should be a co-creative process and that the coach and coachee can evolve and explore new insights and directions as they become apparent through the coaching journey.

Figure 2. Diagram of communication skills within PACT model



For PACT to be an effective tool to aid performance, the communication skills of the coach or practitioner and how they interact with the athlete are fundamental. The conversations leading up to or before the competition preload the support that will be given and the framing of the event itself. Communication skills will help athletes clarify their goals, manage expectations, and prepare mentally and emotionally for performance.

Active listening allows coaches to engage with athletes meaningfully. Listening to the athlete's concerns, feelings, and thoughts and ensuring clarity through paraphrasing and checking understanding helps align the relevant phase of the PACT model to the athlete's needs. For example, active listening helps identify event-specific and personal motivations in the Purpose phase. The Awareness phase ensures that athletes' thoughts, emotions, and self-awareness are considered when defining success metrics and emotional preparedness.

Emotional intelligence and empathy allow the coach to understand the athlete's emotional state and be aware of any concerns about the competition. Through an acknowledgment of the feelings of the athlete, a coach can build rapport and trust whilst identifying emotions that may inhibit performance. For example, in the Awareness phase, empathy helps athletes recognize and understand their emotional states, enabling them to regulate emotions and set realistic success measures. In the Challenge phase, emotional intelligence aids in framing the competition appropriately, ensuring that athletes view challenges as opportunities to grow rather than threats.

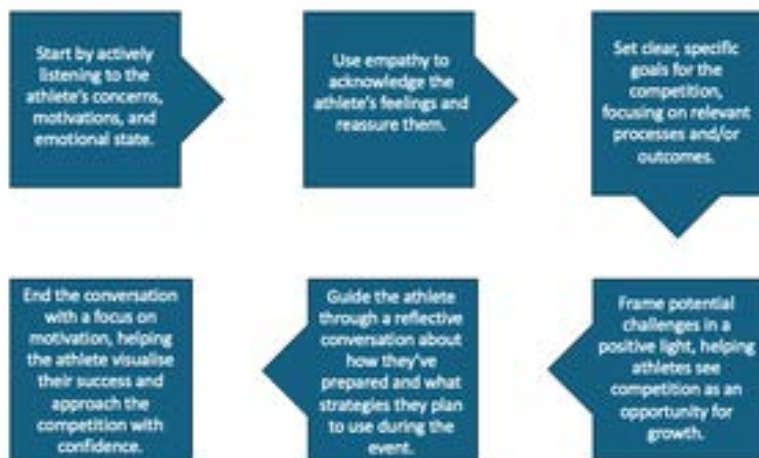
Clarity is essential in communicating the expectations of the athlete and the coach to avoid ambiguity or confusion. Within competitive environments, coaches must ensure they articulate specific nuances clearly and at a level the athlete can clearly understand to avoid any confusion in the athlete's perception of their purpose and goals for the event. For example, clear communication about the event's purpose in the Purpose phase helps athletes focus on their intrinsic motivations. In the Challenge phase, clarity around expectations and the type of competition helps athletes frame challenges appropriately, ensuring they are both prepared and motivated.

Through positive framing and reframing, any perceived obstacles can be viewed as opportunities rather than obstacles or threats. Coaches need to use reframing techniques to construct a scaffolding around negative perceptions that reframes them to challenges that support long-term growth. For example, in the Challenge phase, reframing helps athletes develop a healthy perspective on competition, shifting focus from fear of failure to viewing the event as an opportunity for personal growth. In the Thrive phase, positive framing enables athletes to focus on learning and improvement, no matter the event's outcome.

Through questioning and facilitated problem-solving, the athlete will be encouraged to think critically about their performance preparation, and with a depth of open questioning, the athlete will become more self-aware by exploring their perceptions

and thoughts. By facilitating problem-solving through discussions, athletes can create solutions to potential obstacles whilst raising their awareness of the complexities of the demands of the sport, fostering a deeper understanding of the strategies needed to succeed. For example, in the Awareness phase, questioning helps athletes evaluate their mental and emotional states, identifying areas for improvement. In the Thrive phase, problem-solving allows athletes to address challenges faced during the competition and find solutions to enhance future performance.

Figure 3. Example of communication in pre performance conversations



These communication skills help create a supportive and transparent framework for athletes to engage with the PACT Model, fostering mental and emotional preparedness for competition.

CONCLUSION

By grounding the PACT model in coaching psychology, we create a comprehensive framework that integrates intrinsic motivation, self-awareness, resilience, and wellbeing—all essential for peak performance through the integration of coaching psychology into a sports-specific PACT Model for Performance Preparation. Specific coaching psychology tools and techniques underpin each phase of the PACT model. Purpose draws on Motivational Interviewing, Self-Determination Theory, and the GROW model to ensure athletes set meaningful, intrinsically motivated

goals. Awareness is enhanced through mindfulness, attention control, and Cognitive Behavioral Coaching to improve focus, emotional regulation, and performance readiness. Challenge uses frameworks like Mental Toughness, Resilience, and Growth Mindset to help athletes overcome adversity and view setbacks as opportunities for growth. Thrive emphasizes Strengths-Based Coaching, Positive Psychology, and Self-Reflection to foster wellbeing and sustained high performance. Coaching psychology frameworks provide a scientifically validated foundation for the PACT model, ensuring that athletes are prepared for optimal performance and supported in maintaining their long-term mental health and well-being.

CASE STUDY: APPLYING THE PACT MODEL TO A JUNIOR INTERNATIONAL PISTOL SHOOTER

Introduction to the Athlete and Challenge

This case study explores the application of the PACT (Purpose, Awareness, Challenge, Thrive) model in addressing performance challenges faced by a junior international pistol shooter. The athlete, a promising talent in the competitive shooting circuit, consistently demonstrates exceptional skill and precision in training environments. However, a recurring and significant obstacle to their success has been a noticeable drop in performance during major international matches. This performance decrement is primarily attributed to somatic anxiety, manifesting as involuntary shaking, particularly during critical moments of competition. This physiological response to pressure significantly impacts their ability to maintain a steady aim and execute precise shots, ultimately hindering their potential to secure top placements.

The PACT model offers a structured yet flexible framework to address such performance issues by focusing on the psychological underpinnings of athletic readiness. Through a systematic approach, the model aims to empower athletes to not only manage performance anxiety but also to cultivate a deeper understanding of their motivations, enhance self-regulation, and foster long-term resilience. This case study will detail how each phase of the PACT model was tailored to the unique needs of the pistol shooter, providing a comprehensive walkthrough of the intervention process and its potential impact on their competitive performance.

PACT MODEL APPLICATION

Purpose Phase

The initial phase of the PACT model, Purpose, focuses on establishing a clear and compelling reason for the athlete's engagement in their sport, aligning their core values with their competitive aspirations. For the junior international pistol shooter, this phase began with a series of in-depth discussions aimed at uncovering their intrinsic motivations beyond the immediate desire for medals or recognition. While external achievements are certainly motivating, a deeper, more sustainable drive often stems from personal values and long-term goals.

Through guided reflection, the athlete identified a profound passion for the discipline of pistol shooting, valuing the mental fortitude, precision, and self-control it demands. Their long-term goals extended beyond winning; they aspired to master their craft, consistently perform at their personal best, and inspire younger athletes. This broader perspective helped to contextualize the pressure experienced during major matches. Instead of viewing these events solely as high-stakes tests of skill, they began to see them as opportunities to embody their values and progress towards their overarching aspirations.

Connecting these macro-level purposes to micro-level event objectives was crucial. For each upcoming competition, the athlete and coach collaboratively defined specific, process-oriented goals that resonated with their deeper purpose. For instance, instead of solely focusing on achieving a particular score, objectives included maintaining a consistent pre-shot routine under simulated pressure, executing a specific number of shots with optimal trigger control, or demonstrating composure during challenging moments. This shift in focus helped to reduce the overwhelming nature of outcome-based goals, which often exacerbate somatic anxiety. By linking daily training and competitive efforts to their core values and long-term vision, the athlete developed a more resilient and intrinsically driven motivation, providing a stable foundation for navigating the subsequent phases of the PACT model.

Awareness Phase

The Awareness phase of the PACT model is critical for helping the athlete understand the nature of their performance challenges, particularly the somatic anxiety manifesting as shaking during major matches. This phase involved a detailed exploration of the triggers, physiological sensations, and cognitive interpretations associated with their anxiety.

Initially, the athlete perceived the shaking as an uncontrollable and debilitating symptom, leading to a sense of helplessness. The Awareness phase aimed to demystify

this response. Through careful self-monitoring, the athlete began to identify specific cues that preceded the shaking, such as increased heart rate, shallow breathing, or specific negative thoughts (e.g.,

“I can’t miss this shot” or “Everyone is watching”). This process involved using a journal to log pre-competition feelings, physical sensations, and thoughts, as well as reviewing video recordings of past performances to identify patterns.

Furthermore, the coach and athlete worked on developing a heightened awareness of their physiological state. This included practicing body scans and mindfulness exercises to notice subtle changes in muscle tension, breathing patterns, and heart rate before the shaking became pronounced. The goal was not to eliminate anxiety entirely, but to recognize its early warning signs and understand that these sensations are normal physiological responses to perceived threat, rather than indicators of impending failure. This reframing of anxiety from a debilitating enemy to a manageable signal was a significant step.

Establishing process-oriented success metrics was another key component of this phase. Instead of solely focusing on the final score, the athlete began to track and celebrate successes related to their pre-shot routine, their ability to maintain composure during a challenging shot, or their capacity to re-focus after a distraction. For example, they might set a goal to consistently execute their breathing technique for five consecutive shots, regardless of the outcome. This shift in focus helped to build confidence in their ability to control their internal state, even when external pressure was high, thereby reducing the perceived threat of somatic anxiety and fostering a greater sense of self-efficacy.

Challenge Phase

The Challenge phase of the PACT model is designed to help the athlete confront and reframe the competitive environment, transforming perceived threats into opportunities for growth and skill application. For the junior international pistol shooter, this involved directly addressing the fear of somatic anxiety and its impact on performance during major matches.

Initially, major competitions were viewed as high-stakes, anxiety-inducing events where the risk of shaking and underperforming loomed large. The intervention focused on cognitive reframing, helping the athlete to consciously shift their perspective. Instead of seeing a major match as a test of their ability to not shake, they were encouraged to view it as an opportunity to apply the psychological skills they had been developing. This included framing the pressure as a sign of importance and excitement, rather than a precursor to failure. The coach emphasized that the physical sensations of arousal, while uncomfortable, could be channeled into heightened focus and readiness, a concept rooted in optimal arousal theories.

Practical strategies were introduced to manage somatic anxiety during competition. These included:

1. **Diaphragmatic Breathing:** The athlete practiced deep, controlled breathing techniques to regulate their heart rate and calm their nervous system. This was integrated into their pre-shot routine, providing a consistent anchor point to return to when anxiety began to escalate.
2. **Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR):** Shortened versions of PMR were taught to be used discreetly between shots or during breaks, allowing the athlete to release tension in specific muscle groups, particularly in the arms and hands, which were prone to shaking.
3. **Attentional Control Training:** The athlete learned to consciously direct their attention away from internal sensations of anxiety and towards external, task-relevant cues (e.g., sight alignment, trigger pressure). This involved practicing focused attention drills, where they would deliberately shift their focus to specific technical aspects of the shot, even when distractions were present.

Gradual exposure to pressure situations in training was a critical component. This involved simulating competitive scenarios, complete with timed drills, simulated crowd noise, and performance-based consequences (e.g., having to repeat a drill if a certain score wasn't met). The intensity of these simulations was progressively increased, allowing the athlete to practice their anxiety management strategies in a controlled environment. This systematic desensitization helped to build confidence in their ability to cope with pressure, reducing the novelty and perceived threat of actual competition. The aim was not to eliminate anxiety, but to develop a robust set of coping mechanisms that could be reliably deployed when needed, thereby transforming the challenge into a manageable and even beneficial aspect of their performance.

Thrive Phase

The Thrive phase of the PACT model focuses on fostering long-term growth, resilience, and a continuous improvement mindset, irrespective of immediate competitive outcomes. For the junior international pistol shooter, this phase was crucial for integrating the lessons learned from the Purpose, Awareness, and Challenge phases into a sustainable framework for ongoing development and well-being.

Post-performance reflection became a cornerstone of the Thrive phase. After each training session and competition, the athlete engaged in structured debriefs with their coach. These reflections moved beyond simply analyzing scores; they delved into the application of psychological strategies, the management of somatic

anxiety, and the adherence to process-oriented goals. For instance, instead of dwelling on a missed shot, the discussion would center on: “What was my internal state before that shot? Did I execute my breathing technique? Was my attention focused on the target or on the outcome?” This systematic approach allowed the athlete to identify specific areas for improvement in their psychological skill set, rather than attributing performance solely to innate talent or external factors.

Fostering resilience was another key aspect. The athlete learned to view setbacks, such as a disappointing score or a particularly challenging match, not as failures but as valuable learning opportunities. The coach emphasized the concept of a growth mindset, where challenges are embraced as essential components of mastery. When somatic anxiety resurfaced, as it inevitably would, the athlete was encouraged to reflect on their successful coping strategies from previous experiences, reinforcing their self-efficacy. This iterative process of applying strategies, reflecting on their effectiveness, and making adjustments built a robust psychological toolkit.

Developing a continuous improvement mindset meant shifting the focus from perfection to progress. The athlete understood that the journey of an elite shooter involves constant refinement, both technically and psychologically. This included regularly reviewing their Purpose to ensure continued alignment, refining their Awareness of anxiety triggers, and adapting their Challenge strategies as they encountered new competitive environments or higher stakes. The Thrive phase ensured that the PACT model was not a one-time intervention but an ongoing, dynamic process that empowered the pistol shooter to not only manage their somatic anxiety but also to flourish as an athlete, continually learning, adapting, and striving for their personal best in the demanding world of international competition.

CONCLUSION

This case study illustrates the comprehensive and iterative application of the PACT model in addressing performance challenges, specifically somatic anxiety, in a junior international pistol shooter. By systematically working through the Purpose, Awareness, Challenge, and Thrive phases, the athlete was able to gain a deeper understanding of their psychological responses to pressure and develop effective coping mechanisms.

The Purpose phase provided a foundational understanding of the athlete’s intrinsic motivations, shifting their focus from outcome-driven goals to a more values-aligned approach to competition. This re-orientation fostered a more resilient and sustainable drive.

The Awareness phase was crucial for demystifying somatic anxiety, enabling the athlete to identify triggers and early warning signs. This heightened self-awareness,

coupled with process-oriented metrics, empowered the athlete to feel more in control of their internal state.

The Challenge phase equipped the athlete with practical, evidence-based strategies to manage anxiety in real-time, such as diaphragmatic breathing, PMR, and attentional control. Gradual exposure to simulated pressure situations in training further solidified these skills.

Finally, the Thrive phase ensured that learning was continuous and that setbacks were reframed as opportunities for growth. This fostered a growth mindset and long-term resilience, moving the athlete beyond simply coping with anxiety to actively flourishing in their sport.

Key Takeaways

The PACT model provides a structured yet flexible framework for addressing complex psychological challenges in athletes. * A holistic approach that integrates purpose, self-awareness, practical strategies, and continuous reflection is essential for sustainable performance enhancement. * Addressing somatic anxiety requires a multi-faceted approach that combines physiological regulation with cognitive reframing and attentional control. * The iterative nature of the PACT model allows for ongoing adaptation and development, crucial for athletes navigating the evolving demands of competitive sport.

Future Considerations

Continued application of the PACT model will involve ongoing monitoring of the athlete's progress, refinement of strategies, and adaptation to new competitive environments. Future interventions might explore the integration of advanced mental imagery techniques, the use of biofeedback technology to enhance physiological self-regulation, or the development of specific pre-performance routines tailored to different competitive scenarios. The ultimate goal remains to empower the athlete to consistently perform at their peak potential, not just by managing anxiety, but by fully embracing the psychological demands of elite-level competition.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Balanced Approach: A training strategy that emphasizes the integration of various components of athlete development, such as physical training and psychological readiness, to promote holistic growth.

Coaching Psychology: A field that applies psychological principles to enhance coaching effectiveness, focusing on athletes' mental skills, emotional well-being, and performance optimization.

Critical Thinking: The ability to analyze situations, evaluate evidence, and make reasoned judgments. In coaching, critical thinking is essential for developing strategies and solving problems effectively.

Eudaimonia: A concept often translated as "flourishing" or "well-being." In the context of coaching, it emphasizes achieving personal fulfillment and overall growth in athletes, both mentally and physically.

Feedback: Information provided to athletes about their performance, aimed at improving skills and understanding. Effective feedback is specific, constructive, and timely, facilitating athlete growth.

Goal Setting: The process of establishing objectives for performance improvement. In coaching, helping athletes set SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals can enhance focus and motivation.

Holistic Development: An approach to athlete training that considers all aspects of an athlete, including physical, mental, emotional, and social factors, promoting overall well-being and performance.

Motivation: The internal or external drive that compels an athlete to pursue goals and perform at their best. Understanding motivation is crucial for coaches to support athletes' engagement and progress.

Philosophical Frameworks: Systems of thought that provide a basis for understanding and guiding practices in a discipline. In coaching, these frameworks can influence approaches to athlete development and decision-making.

Phronesis: Practical wisdom or the ability to make sound judgments and decisions based on experience and knowledge. It is crucial for understanding complex situations in coaching and athlete development.