

PSYCHED UP OR DOWN?

by Dr. Natascha Wesch, PhD

Former Manchester United soccer coach Alex Ferguson made it a point to help his players relax before games. He'd often be "laughing and joking" minutes before kickoff. For many coaches, this sounds absurd. In fact, I've heard many coaches say something like "You want to get the players pumped to play and focused on the game. If they joke around they'll be zoned out."

In fact, the right approach depends completely on what's best for the individual athlete. Let's look at a typical scenario that happens most Saturday mornings across the country. A young athlete – let's call her Monica – gets in the car with her parents to go to her volleyball game (they are playing their rivals from across town). During the ride, mom and dad talk about the upcoming game. The conversation might go something like this: "Are you excited to be playing in such an important game? Are you nervous?" says mom. Then dad pipes in, "It's ok if you're nervous Monica. Just make sure you focus and concentrate so you don't make any mistakes."

Sounds like an innocent enough conversation, doesn't it? The concern here is that Monica likely has her own ideas about the upcoming game. She might be nervous about the game because she knows it's a big game and doesn't want to make mistakes. So, already, Monica's mental energy is up and she might not be looking at the upcoming game as just a chance to play volleyball with her teammates, but instead she looks at the game as a test, at something a little stressful. Most young people don't like tests (who does, really?). So the innocent conversation in the car has taken Monica's mental state and raised it to a level where she's not quite comfortable. Many people (coaches, athletes, parents) assume that this anxiety and feeling of pressure is a 'normal' part of sport, so they just accept it. But it doesn't have to be. It'll come back to this.

Let's look at what's happening in Monica's brain during the car ride. Because Monica's thoughts are focused on the things that might go wrong, on the importance and pressure of the game, her brain is releasing stress-based chemicals (cortisol is a stress hormone). Cortisol's effect on the body is to make the heart to beat faster, pump the blood harder, cause muscles to tense, and breathing to become restricted. Is this how Monica wants to feel before she plays in her game? Probably not.

Let's continue with the scenario. When Monica arrives at the gym for her game, she gets ready and her coach goes through the regular pre-game routine. It's an important game so the coach wants to convey the importance of this game to her athletes by showing them it's time to be serious. So the coach is stern and dictates what needs to be done and when and barks out a few orders. The coach then huddles up the athletes before the game and says (in a rowdy, in-your-face voice), "Ok, girls, this is a huge game! It's really important that everyone focuses and concentrates. No mistakes! Let's get excited and get pumped up to play this game! Let's GO!" The athletes then circle around the coach, do they cheer as loud as they can, and are ready to play. Or are they?

Now let me back up in time a bit. Monica probably got involved in volleyball because she liked playing it and her friends were playing. The key words here are 'playing' and 'friends'. When children and even adults 'play' they smile, have fun, they are relaxed and are enjoying the process of just playing. In this mental and physical state the brain releases powerful chemicals (testosterone is one) that allow us to act in an uninhibited and confident way (we are not worried about anything or putting on the brakes, we just play). You know what happens when you have fun, are confident and happy? Typically you play well and take risks and do some pretty amazing things (like that dig that you never would have got in a game!). Why? Because you are just playing – you're not overthinking, you just let all the things you know go on automatic pilot.

So how do we take this valuable information and apply it to game day? Most athletes know the game is important – they're not dumb. The key is to help them achieve a mental and physical state that allows them to be relaxed and happy – that is to play at their best. When you combine the athlete's knowledge of the importance of the game with a relaxed and positive mental and physical environment, then you get a good balance of action-based hormones and focused thought.

I'm not saying let them goof off and do whatever they want before the game. Creating a pre-game routine that (1) helps the athlete become physically prepared (sport specific warm-up, technique and strategy review drills/exercises, etc.), and (2) allows them to be in the mental state where they feel relaxed (not asleep) and happy, uninhibited. In other words, allow (and help) each athlete find his or her ideal mental state before the game. Some athletes function well when hyped up, whereas other athletes need to be calm and relaxed. Most athletes fall somewhere in the middle. With young athletes, help them figure this out and provide an environment that is conducive to their ideal mental state. Of course this takes some time and education, but time taken now will help that athlete be able to self-regulate later on in their sporting career and in life. Fundamental skills of sport are just not the technical ones (like serving and passing), they are the mental ones too.

Provide positive feedback, help them focus on what they control and can do to be successful, and inspire confidence in their ability to play. Mistakes will happen – that's part of sport. Being afraid of making mistakes makes us tighten up and lose confidence, so remind the athletes that it's ok to make mistakes, and when they do, go back to basics and what makes them successful (likely focusing on their strengths).

Yes, the pressures of sport can be immense, especially at the higher levels. But if as a coach (or parent) you can help the athlete learn and experiment with what mental state is the most conducive for optimal performance, then you are teaching this athlete mental skills that will go far beyond the next game. It will serve them a lifetime!