

Psychological training for top referees

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Refereeing is an hard task and the referee is severely tried out: he has to pay attention, evaluate and quickly take decision. His task means that he cannot make a mistake because his duty is to identify the mistakes of the others. As the great responsibility of his role the referee behaviour is continuously tested by the public, players, coaches and media. This situation gets highly stressful the refereeing task which can be considered by itself very hard and demanding from the psychological point of view. Therefore, it stands reason how the problem of physical and mental stress control could be responsible of the refereeing performance quality.

Since 1986 (Ceridono, *et al.*, 1986) I worked with top referees in volleyball and football coaching them the management of the interpersonal relationships with the team and the emotional control. I identified five major requisites which the referee must respond: 1. technical competence; 2. independence in the evaluation process; 3. be accepted; 4. supported by physical conditioning; 5. anticipate the development of the game actions. Starting from all these results, it seems important that the referee includes in his traditional athletic training a standard psychological training too, aiming to maintain an high level of stress management during the match.

Today psychological training in the refereeing world is not very diffused and the techniques of stress control and concentration often derive from the empirical experiences of the single umpires. Since the beginning of my work with referees I have found that they used the following techniques: 1. arrive in early for remaining alone and preparing for the match; 2. breath deeply; 3. autogenic training; 4. physical movements for reduce anxiety; 5. stretching; 6. psich-up by positive thinking; 7. other methods (e.g., smoking, reading, take a shower). Among these methods the most used before the game were: arrive in early, practice autogenic training and reduce stress by movements or stretching. While during the match referees utilize meanly the breath control and the psych-up strategies with positive thinking. According with these individual experiences it ha been very useful to propose to them a psychological training program, allowing the referee to empower their empirical experiences with the knowledge and the practice of a structured methods. Thus the referees will achieve a greater steadiness of their performances.

This presentation will illustrate a psychological training method, divided into five major steps which allow to: 1. recognize the major stress sources; 2. identify the optimal pre-game condition; 3. learn relaxation and psych-up techniques; 4. use imagery and visualization techniques; 5. practice these techniques during the match.

The Psychological Program

FIRST STEP Referee should be able to recognize his own level of anxiety and thus he can permit to himself to feel it. This will be easier if referee will realize that anxiety will not represent a negative element for his performance. On the contrary, the psychological and physical tensions that he could feel, before the match, are very important factors of his success, because without these feelings he would be wanting energy and motivation to use during the match. Nowadays, we distinguish between somatic anxiety and cognitive anxiety and its influences on the sport performance. Usually somatic anxiety reaches its higher level at the beginning of the performance and disappears during the carrying out of the task. Whereas the cognitive anxiety shows itself in negative expectations and thinkings about the performance success. So the referee has to learn how to recognize anxiety signals for controlling them and making a good use of the energy arising from his anxiety. In order to allow to the referee to recognize somatic anxiety this program presents a list of its main expressions (e.g. are your hands cold? Are you holding your breath? Is your heart beating stronger than usual?).

As far as cognitive anxiety is concerned this program suggests the referee to be aware of his own thoughts before his performance. For this goal too, some topics are presented (e.g., are you thinking about negative situations? Are you thinking about your possible mistakes? Do you feel that you are not ready to cope with this task?). Negative expectations and thoughts affect the performance and thus to be aware of these mental processes should represent the first step for reducing their negative influences.

SECOND STEP The aim of this step is to define the optimal pre-match condition of the referee. In fact, Hanin researches showed individual differences in the pre-competitive arousal level. Hanin demonstrated that each athlete has his own zone of optimal functioning (IZOF) which can be low, medium or high. Furthermore, most of the psychological training program for athletes use this approach in the beginning period of the preparation, as to train the athletes to create their optimal condition. For this reason, the referee at the beginning of

the competitive season has to fill a sheet called "Pre-game reflexion" where he describes how he feels himself, what he is thinking about, and on what he is paying attention to, before one of his best and before one of his worst performance. So doing he becomes aware of how his pre-match attitude could affect his performance and he can identify his optimal pre-game condition.. The sheet from Orlick's work describes four major areas: 1. physical activation; 2. level of worry; 3. self-talk before the event; 4. focus during the event. The sheet fulfilled by the referee could be useful to coach the skill of reaching the optimal activation level.

THIRD STEP It is very useful for the referee to learn a relaxation technique, in order to control high anxiety level which could affect his performance. Furthermore, this relaxation technique will be efficient when the referee presents somatic anxiety symptoms.. Many relaxation techniques could be practiced by the umpire, the most used are Schultz's autogenic training and Jacobson's progressive neuromuscular relaxation. Both are efficient for controlling precompetitive somatic anxiety, that is to say to increase the control on the muscular tensions, the heart frequency and the breath frequency.

FOURTH STEP It consists in practicing mental imagery, visualization or ideomotor training. It is called imagery the mental rehearsal of a motor action as if you were doing it in that specific moment. This mental training is useful in motor tasks associated with a cognitive-symbolic activity. The training can benefit by mental practice in the following situations:

1. During the refereeing technique training, the umpire could improve using the mental rehearsal of the specific technique fundamentals, increasing not only their stabilization but also their automatization process. In fact, the practice of the mental imagery training stimulates the development of three main functions:

- it carries out a programming function of motor behavior being an image of a real action;
- at the same time, the ideomotor rehearsal of the movement supports the perfecting process of the motor behavior doing a real training function;
- the ideomotor training, during the action, seems to be a compulsory step of the control and correction processes of the motor action, playing a regulating function.

2. Mental rehearsal could be used for improving the skill of achieving optimal precompetitive condition. The exercise consists to coach oneself to recreate the best psychological condition

to cope with the sport event.

3. Finally, mental rehearsal could also be used to improve the other psychological skills, as for instance to learn how to have excellent performances in highly stress situation. Even negative thoughts could be controlled by learning to visualize oneself in situations where the insuccess fear affects the performance. This training will support the concentration on sport task, orienting the focus in a efficient way.

FIFTH STEP This final aspect of the referee psychological training concerns his match preparation and it is possible to divide it into four phases:

1. The appointment In this phase the referee has to effect his first evaluation of the task (e.g., teams characteristics, players, field of the match, and so on) This cognitive assessment will permit to identify the main elements to be focused not only during the match but also before it, in order to develop the adequate approach for that kind of event.

2. Pre-game The mental training could be practiced by the referee before the match in order to feel himself confident about his future performance. The mental rehearsal of his expected optimal condition and the identification of the main elements to be focused during the match represent the most efficient training the refereee could practice in this phase.

3. The game The referee is, obviously, concentrated on the game, during the match, and from the psychological point of view his main ennemies could be those negative thoughts which appear sometimes after a mistake or during difficult game phases. Often, in these situations, each referee uses his personal way to maintain the concentration, but if he fails, it should be useful to take some deep breaths or repeat to himself some simple and affermative words which can increase the self-confident.

4. The assessment After the match, during this phase, the referee has to assess his performance not only from the technique point of view but also his psychological preparation for the match, his management of the game difficult phases and his concentration or his confidence and so on.. This assessment, often misunderstanding, is on the contrary very important because it determines future negative or positive expectations of the referee about his competence and the outcomes of next performances.

References

Ceridono, D., Formica, F., Cei, A., & Bergerone, C. (1986). *Psicologia per gli arbitri di pallavolo*. Roma: Stampa Sportiva -