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A BRICK ON THE OLYMPIC MEDAL WALL

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Abstract

Each and every “brick” in the 4-year Olympic preparation program is important and has its own role in the construction of the desired result. The present paper focuses on presenting the Improvisational Theatre component in the mental preparation program of the Olympic Epee Team before the 2016 Olympic Games. There were identified a lot of similarities between Improvisation Theatre and fencing, as follows: the dialogue with the partner/opponent; accepting the duel and challenges; the unpredictability and tolerance of the unknown; reaction speed; attitude towards taking risks; confidence in the initial decision; uncensored access to manifest latent resources too; the ability of coping with the surprise element; when high performance is achieved, the need to return to base (Game/Load). The athletes involved in this program were the members of the Olympic Women’s Epee Team. As a result of the complementary training program, the athletes identified the fact that all the difficulties they had faced during the Improvisational Theatre training sessions were also present during the bouts, concluding that the transfer between the non-specific training (Improvisation Theatre training) and the specific sports preparation could be done successfully. The added value of these training sessions was in terms of attitude, flow, pleasure and decision-making.

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1. Introduction

Psychological training is part of the training process and respects the same principles as sports training. Mental training has the role of adding a plus value to the already excellent physical, technical and tactical preparation of the athletes. In Viola Spolin's (1963) perspective, talent is the highly-developed capacity of an individual to experience, and applied sports psychology aims to put the athlete in the situation of experiencing this sense too, gaining knowledge about him/herself and facilitating self-development. Most of the time, training routines suppress spontaneity and develop the conscience of self-performance. The sports involving an opponent, in our case, fencing, are about spontaneity, intuition, fast decisions and courage of taking risk.

On the one hand, sports performance has been over the years a source of inspiration for many domains. Even the Improvisation Theatre had this source of inspiration. Keith Johnstone (1979) created TheatreSports inspired by the ancient wrestling, which he considered to be a theatre for the working class, and came up with the idea of replacing wrestlers with improvisers. On the other hand, improvisation techniques have been used over the last decades in various domains, with great success. In a pilot experiment, Gangl (2014) redefined the effects of theatre on people with a mild traumatic brain injury, also using, as intervention tools, exercises specific to the training of the Improvisation Theatre actor, such as the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale, the La Trobe Communication Scale and a questionnaire designed by the author of the study; the researcher concluded that actor-specific training exercises had effects on subjects improving their communication skills, increasing their sense of inclusion, improving their ability to manage and balance anxiety in situations of public expression and helping them regain confidence in their own person and power. The idea of becoming aware of you, which Uta Hagen (1973, 1991), Viola Spolin (2008), Brian Way (1967) and Keith Johnstone (1991) pointed out as the goal of gaming exercises or Improvisation Theatre exercises, was considered relevant and important for the study conducted by Gangl (2014). In his book, *Theatrical Improvisation, Consciousness and Cognition*, Drinko (2013) discusses several experiments and studies outside the Improvisation Theatre, but using improvisation techniques and principles, for example, for treating people with autism or diagnosed with dementia. While dealing with autism, he only discusses personal experiences or of other participants in the Improvisation Theatre (Drinko, 2013, p. 114), regarding dementia, the author mentions an ongoing, organized and targeted research to find treatment, specifying that the measurements are far from the end (Drinko, 2013, p. 29). According to Drinko, researchers at North-Western University use techniques and methods specific to the Improvisation Theatre as a possible treatment for people diagnosed with dementia. Actors in the Lookingglass Players Improvisation Theatre group lead workshops for people suffering from dementia, and the participants so far, according to preliminary results, have shown increased levels of comfort and progress due to the fact that, in improvisation, the focus is on the present, on the "here and now", not on past experiences or anticipation of the future. Research leaders relate this requirement, to be "here and now", of the Improvisation Theatre and the rule "yes, and ..." (the rule that the only possible answer in the Improvisation Theatre is "yes", complemented by a new action/proposal), to the progress in the treatment of participants and an improvement in the quality of their lives.

In his extensive work on improvisation and its effects on consciousness and cognition, Drinko starts from the premise that training for externalisation in improvisation brings changes to the brain's functioning.

The author argues that once an experienced improviser steps on stage, extraordinary things may happen to their state of consciousness and cognition (Drinko, 2013, p. 93). Referring to Daniel Kahneman's two thinking systems, Drinko states: "By focusing outward on one's scene partners, the game of the scene or the space, skilled improvisers can order consciousness in such a way that system 1 or intuitive, automatic thinking rises to the surface in the competition among different modes of thought" (Drinko, 2013, p. 93). We believe that, even if Kahneman (2012) has claimed that man is subject to the traps of intuition and that, although it would be desirable, there are no ways to train the intuition and System 1 to reduce their frequency by cognition, the Improvisation Theatre offers such training. Through Improvisation Theatre training, the actor also manages to increase the speed of transition from System 1 to System 2 (and vice versa). Improvisation teachers, such as Viola Spolin, Del Close and Keith Johnstone, have proven that their approaches to creativity are working. Changing/directing attention on the outside helps players to respond quickly, spontaneously and creatively. Also, as Drinko notes, this concentration on the outside also has another effect on the mind in improvisation: when each improviser's attention focuses on other improvisers, the clues and signs of others' behaviour and thought processes become more accessible to see, interpret, and the improviser is more natural to react to (Drinko, 2013, p. 97).

In the light of these studies, we considered Improvisation Theatre techniques to be useful also in the area of sports performance.

There are a lot of similarities between Improvisational Theatre and fencing, as follows: the dialogue with the partner/opponent; accepting the duel and challenges; the unpredictability and tolerance of the unknown; reaction speed; attitude towards risk-taking; confidence in the initial decision; uncensored access to manifest latent resources too; ability of coping with the surprise element; when high performance is achieved, the need to return to base (Game/Play); structure of the training; intention.

2. Problem Statement

Before the 2016 Olympic Games, the epee team relived the failure from London 2012. They felt a profound fear: on the one hand, a profound fear of success before the Olympic Games, because victories were associated with high expectations from the sports authorities and, on the other side, a significant fear of failure in the final competition, the Olympic Games. They seemed blocked and lost, in the sense of the certainty of self-control and own potential of coping with future events. Their spontaneity was lost into perfectionism and technique, and their intuition was suffocated by cognitive interference. The joy, pleasure and performance madness were lost into responsibilities and expectations. In this context, with a team with high physical, technical and tactical competencies, but with suffocated mental resources, it was necessary something new, something that could get them out of the routine, pre-set scenarios and mental blockages.

Along with other unconventional means of psychological training and some classical methods of mental training, we introduced Improvisational Theatre into their athletic preparation. The premise in Improvisational Theatre games is that the intuitive must be accessed to incorporate intelligence, in our case strategic intelligence specific to fencing. Also according to Viola Spolin (1963), through improvisation, participants have a direct experience ("here and now") and integrate the mind and the body into a challenge to a state (or flow) where they are fully involved intellectually, physically and intuitively, spontaneous in action and gain knowledge in the act of doing. The act of doing means experiencing.

We thought that, by developing spontaneity in athletes, they would restructure/reform inside themselves, considering the perspective according to which spontaneity frees from the past, from memory chocked with old-facts information and undigested theories and techniques (Spolin, 1963).

Improvisation is a particular mode of performance activity, in which performance, the production of work is “here and now”, “on the spot”. Improvisation combines and exploits the skills of using the body, the creativity, the objects and all human resources to formulate and reformulate a coherent expression of an idea, a situation and a character (Frost & Yarrow, 2016). Improvisation involves the development of skills and attributes necessary for performance and other individual and group resources, for being able to spontaneously respond to the immediate environmental stimuli without preconception, to renegotiate being and doing and access possibilities of finding solutions in every situation.

3. Research Questions

The central research question is whether including theatrical improvisation techniques in the psychological preparation program, before the Olympic Games, is beneficial regarding spontaneity and freedom from the past.

The secondary research question centres on the possibility of identifying the difficulties from the bout into the Improvisational Theatre training sessions. In this sense, we aim to determine whether it is possible to regulate some of the challenges through theatre, with an effect on the performance dimension.

4. Purpose of the Study

The present study had a rather practical approach, entering the zone of applied sports psychology. Therefore, our primary goal was to stimulate the team towards accessing intuition and spontaneity by including games of Improvisational Theatre in the psychological preparation program. We aimed to do, not necessarily observe and measure.

In this sense, our objectives can be structured as follows: (1) Creating psycho-sensory exercises for a favourable climate, removing censorship and inhibitions that may occur; (2) Physical and mental stress relief, stimulation of imagination, awareness and activity of distributive attention, teamwork, practicing the concept of attitude; (3) Increasing spontaneity; (4) Increasing tolerance to the unknown; (5) Growing confidence in one’s capabilities; (6) Diminishing social fear of success and failure through exposure; (7) Increasing the ability to accept the new; (8) Increasing mutual knowledge and team cohesion; (9) Working with optimal parameters in a team, taking responsibility and practicing promptness in making decisions.

5. Research Methods

The research methods used to achieve the proposed objectives are the pedagogical observation method and investigation method (through the feedback questionnaire). In this study, observation was directed to the behaviour of athletes placed in unfamiliar situations, but possibly easily integrated as non-specific training complementary to psychological assistance. The following were similar to those that can be traced in specific athletic training. The observed data were recorded after the end of each working session.

To identify possible areas of action/intervention of non-specific training deriving from Improvisation Theatre techniques, the opportunity/need for such training and also the games with the most intensive impact on athletes, we chose to use the Feedback-Questionnaire Survey method. Feedback questionnaires were prepared before each session, according to the objectives of that session, and were completed by athletes at the end of the session. Feedback forms included five items: (1) Which of the exercises seemed most useful to you?; (2) Which of the tasks seemed the least comfortable?; (3) How do you think you can transfer the information from today's practices into your performance?; (4) What do you think you could improve on yourself through specific Improvisational Theatre exercises?; (5) In general, how did you feel today before, during and after the workout? Also, the subjects' verbal reports, perceptions, impressions and thoughts were recorded and taken into account to know both the extent to which they received the indications and the degree of mobilisation and impairment during the activity.

5.1. Participants

Considering the pressure of the Olympic Games, these training sessions were directed exclusively to the members of the Olympic Epee Team. Of the six fencers participating in the study, four were the main team and the other two, reserves, in case of crises or unpredictable events.

5.2. Exercises

In the preparation of the Improvisational Theatre techniques, which we will present in this section, we have started from the premise that improvisation does not seek to turn participants into future actors, but to trigger inner springs existing in each of us that help to disinhibit, mentally relax and overcome psychological "thresholds" that seem insurmountable. In proposing these techniques, we have considered self-knowledge, spontaneity, creativity, cooperation, adaptability, rapidity in decision-making, the ability to work in a team, quickly overcome failure and mistakes, engage in observation, increase resistance to mental effort, discover and maintain emotional balance, which are just a few of the skills and attitudes that improvisation training can develop or improve fundamentally.

The training structure, according to the initial plan, included several types of exercises and games, as follows: warm-up exercises and team exercises focused on the group and the knowledge of team members (the participants knew each other well or not); attention and concentration exercises, spontaneity exercises and exposure exercises; simple preparatory theatre games.

Exercise 1: "Metronome". Objectives: Practicing the tempo/rhythm, the ability to work on multiple planes and points of concentration, increasing the power to adapt to unpredictable stimuli, anchoring in the "here and now"; satellite-centred bidirectional coordination, rhythm, memory, coherence of speech.

Exercise 2: "Press Conference". Objectives: Engaging tolerance to the unknown, assuming the risk, using the arbitrary step technique, practicing collective agreement. It is an exercise in which the leading player is exposed in public and needs courage to accept and invent possible answers, without knowing what he/she will be talking about.

Exercise 3: "The Duel of Questions". Objectives: Improving the ability to respond directly practicing and accepting the exposure of others, the speed of reaction, training the ability to discover the opponent,

practicing curiosity towards the partner, the act of wonder. Only interacted: the ability to synthesise, fair play, spontaneity

Exercise 4: “A Story in Four”. Objectives: Increasing error endurance, tolerance to spectators’ hostility, acceptance of unpredictability, renunciation to one’s own ideas and behaviours that prove to be ineffective in the game, practicing attitude: “there is no mistake, but only an unexploited opportunity”, annihilating critical and self-critical spirit, learning to be proactive, practicing the reflex of not staying anchored in the immediate past, the ability to recover despite the missed acts. The story in four – building a platform, identifying potentially dramatic elements/situations

Exercise 5: “Mirror and Cardinal Points”. Objectives: Attention distribution, awareness of mental-body reciprocity, enhancing the ability to resist effort, pressure-endurance, prioritisation of tasks, imbalance management and openness towards the outside, self-acceptance.

6. Findings

6.1. Observations

As the working group was small, the athletes felt exposed. At the same time, they knew each other, which theoretically represented an advantage. However, their previous knowledge gained in training and competitions has enriched, as the approaches and personal solutions found in non-specific Improvisation Theatre training were the novelty, this type of discovery being part of the specific benefits of improvisation. The athletes’ findings were both personal and team-related. Interpersonal relationships at team level are often tributary to a type of everyday communication. That is why the emergence of ideas, reactions and new emotions facilitated by this type of training has the role of breaking this routine, reviving the interest and attention for co-working and recalibrating the level of involvement and activation within the team. The fact that athletes believe they are tied to other team members often deprives them of the curiosity of discovery and limits their ability to react appropriately, in competition, to the proposals and needs of others. By experience and the shared past, athletes often anticipate and believe that they know how teammates react without “listening” and receiving in real time the information they need to build “action together” to achieve performance.

Although initially they were reluctant, once engaged in their work, they were effectively involved. The confidence given by the coach to this type of training and his presence too were noteworthy.

The most significant difficulties they had were related to exercises involving the speed of reaction with rhythm breaks, moments in which they seemed vulnerable, but with the desire for immediate repulsion. Fencers work well according to the rules, even if they initially reject them, and if they are quickly trained in an activity, they are driven and enter into a state of flow.

During training, a great need for exposure, game and play was identified. Enthusiasm and passion became noticeable as the athletes engaged in tasks.

Being non-specific training, the ease of gaining a perspective on one’s own capabilities and functionality was greater. It was also found that it was easier to accept and mirror them in non-specific training than in the specific one.

Observing that the athletes were talking permanently about the fact that what happened in the Improvisational Theatre training was re-enacted on the piste, we identified an excellent ability to transfer the information transmitted in the sports activity, at least at the mental level.

Although fencing is an individual sport that also has team events, it is necessary for the athletes to do things together, so that - from together - to be distinguished as an individual.

6.2. Results from the feedback forms

The exercises indicated to be the most useful were those in which the degree of control over their own actions was the greatest, in which they felt challenged. In conclusion, they found beneficial those exercises that were challenging. The need to win victories and have control over situations of high difficulty, the kind of limit situations, crisis that might occur during the Olympics event were the elements with a great degree of utility in their perception. It is also noted that they prefer “dialogue” exercises similar to the activities in the sport practiced, where the dialogue is between two athletes. Practically, through the improvisation training session, the duel on the piste was non-specifically replicated. Throughout the exercise, they have noted that the difficulties they face on the piste reflect in improvisation exercises. There is an old saying that fencing is a non-word dialogue between the two fencers on the piste. Also, taking into consideration that epee has rather theatrical roots, being the weapon used for defending honour, their perception is justified.

Most of the fencers stated they were less comfortable with the exposure exercises, the “Duel of Questions” and the “Press Conference”. In this respect, though useful, the “duel” exercises seemed the least comfortable for them, being aware of the transfer from improvisation to performance; the uncertainties brought to light by the Improvisation Theatre exercises and the task of carrying out the exercise, despite the discomfort, found their correspondents in the difficulties on the fencing strip. The “repair” (correction) perspective appears through complementary non-specific training.

The main ideas and information considered to be essential for the transfer to high performance are: (1) Ability to stay in the present without designing, without unnecessary consumption of resources and without rummaging unnecessarily past failures; (2) Total trust in action and risk-taking; (3) Increased ability to hide one’s intention in front of the opponent, translated into fencing as a second intention.

The central elements useful for performance development can be resumed in the following: (1) Ability to concentrate attention and enter into the state of flow. Concentration and presence in the immediacy of the moment; (2) Ability to assume leadership, dominate the opponent; Masking intentions; (3) Creativity and determination. Trust in one’s own decision. Trust in one’s own capacity of control. Focus on the solution.

Participants have reported reduced mental fatigue in improvised theatre exercises, suggesting that they can play a significant role in emotional discharge, as well as increasing motivation by activating the play-related pleasure. However, some participants have become aware of the vulnerabilities and difficulties they have in expressing themselves as individuals, which is associated with their expression on the piste. All of them felt grateful for the information revealed through the training and expressed their intention of creating anchors in this experience to remember joy, pleasure and the “here and now” attitude.

7. Conclusion

Taking into account the fact that athletes are aware that they have the same difficulties on the fencing strip as they had during the improvisation training, we can conclude that the transfer can be done successfully, and the non-specific training using Improvisation Theatre techniques can facilitate the specific sports training efficiency. This conclusion responds to our research question. Also, the athletes signalled the need to include improvisation in all stages of training and stated the benefits of including improvisation-specific exercises as such in sports training.

In high-level sports training, each factor becomes essential and significant to the objective of the competition. All trained elements, as well as the native ones, are dynamic to achieve the goal. In the context of the Olympic Games, all previous experiences have gained meaning and cannot be defined as single elements. The Improvisation Theatre came as a plus value, a breakthrough, a new breath when it was demanded.

Training is the key and the road to both improvisation actors and elite athletes. The training for the unpredictable and the novelty should complement the already established training methods, as it has proven its usefulness through this experiment. For the improvisation actor, any sliding of the present attracts, for themselves and the stage partners, the failure of the construction, the impossibility of continuing the development of the act, which, in the classical theatre, is not valid. That is why the improvisation training applied to other human activities is essential and has beneficial effects. In some areas of activity, such training for acceptance, for improving communication ability, for desensitisation to the stress of being watched, is a kind of paradigm shift. In sport, its benefits rely on learning or developing mental skills through other methods than those already known by the athlete, mainly through play and experimentation, aiming to remain in a “here and now” state.

In improvisation, we have the opportunity to experience various emotions and learn more about ourselves in relation to these emotions, as well as to learn to overcome fear faster, not to delay decision-making, to quickly overcome failures and misses and to cultivate our joy. All these are useful skills for elite athletes.

Improvisation is a rediscovery and an exercise of freedom and a kind of courage training, you must have the courage to expose yourself, to make and accept suggestions (without starting to think “why was I invested with such a role?”), to carry forward the ideas and proposals of the other, to make and assume arbitrary steps, to find justification for the actions of others and make their projects possible, to make decisions, to activate intuition. In improvisation, you think in action, and emotion is secondary. Improvisation training applied to performance athletes had a positive result. The goal was partially achieved – the need was identified, but for the next step, the methodology and measurements have to be modified before the training sessions to find out which are the skills improved and those gained by the athletes.

We also think that this type of training can be used successfully for team sports, although we still do not know how the effects can be assessed.

Improvisation is not intended to turn participants into future actors, but to trigger inner springs existing in each of us that help to disinhibit, mentally relax and overcome psychological “thresholds” that seem insurmountable.

7.1. Limitations

To have the expected effect, it is essential that the non-specific training inspired by the art of the Improvisation Theatre actor is conceived and implemented in the sports psychologist-improviser team, because much information circulated must be translated into the language of the athlete. Also, considering that Improvisation Theatre techniques have been established as part of psychological training (a component of sports training), collaboration with the coach is essential. It is critical to keep in mind that the objectives of mental training are in line with those of the training period in which the athletes are. In the absence of the coach-sports psychologist-improviser triad, the effect of non-specific training may be diminished or even null. The role of the coach is central in the design phase of non-specific training, but also in subsequent stages of implementation and debriefing. To create anchors in this non-specific training, the coach must understand and be aware of the transfer possibilities and its benefits.

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