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THEATRE OF ELITE PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

Most of the time, high performance in sports is similar to the Improvisation Theatre. Mainly as concerns the sports which involve opponents, dissimulation, improvisation, attitude, taking decisions without hesitation, all these elements make the difference between the forth ranked and the medallists. Mental training involves not only the emotional and cognitive sides of the athlete, but also the attitude, the trust in their instincts and drives and the freedom of being authentic in a functional manner specific for the chosen sport. The present paper focuses on the benefits of bringing techniques specific to the art of the actor in the process of mental training of top athletes. These benefits rely on the development of specific characteristics like: the ability of coping with new and stressful situations, maintaining focus, reactivating pleasure in sports, activating the courage of acting and taking decisions, entering the flow state of mind. The sports psychology approach, the literature on theatrical arts, the sports training theory, along with a psychoanalytic perspective, shape the theoretical theatre of elite performance in the present paper. The conclusions of the paper focus on the benefits of integrating non-specific complementary mental training inspired by the art of the actor in the psychological preparation of top athletes, creating the perspective of a new method for supporting top performance in sport.

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Keywords: Sports psychology, performance drives, attitude, Improvisational Theatre.



1. Introduction

Most of the time, sports and theatre are perceived as being antithetical (Fotheringham, 1992), because theatre is considered to be an art with a highly developed artistic component, while sports are mostly physical. Even when we started to approach the perspective of including theatre techniques as part of the psychological preparation program, athletes were sceptical, considering that it would be appropriate only for artistic sports. The idea of creating a link between sports and theatre came up when working with a fencer; she said: “It is different when you are on the piste and in competition. When you put the mask on, you become another person: the person you want or you must be. You can be anyone”. The sport has a theatrical dimension both regarding structure and execution. When watching sports, it is like organically feeling the story that the athlete is telling. The physical exercise is narrative. The body tells a story without words. The mute body expresses emotion, attitude and will. Athletic performance is not only physical, but it is also enriched and accompanied by meanings communicated through the body and derived from it, and those meanings are genuinely significant (Magdalinski, 2009, p. 60). Playing sport is an authentic act, and the action is staged in front of an interested audience for their entertainment, similarly to the theatre. The athletic event is out of the ordinary, putting on stage what has been previously learned and practiced. Above all, like theatre, sport is a deliberately created event, exceptional from the everyday routine (Szerszynski, Heim, & Watterton, 2003). Athletic performance is not only about strength, speed and endurance, but it also incorporates the creative, aesthetic and emotive elements of traditional theatre (Magdalinski, 2009).

The relationship between theatre and performance has been observed for quite some time, and their similarities have been approached in the scientific literature. In the 19th century, theatres were used for athletic events. Examples in this sense are artistic gymnastics and boxing (Fotheringham, 1992). As sports developed in popularity and importance, they have gained their unique arenas for performance. Schechner (1988), analysing the similarities between theatre and sports, indicates the following: a particular ordering in time; the objects are invested with great value and significance; non-productivity in terms of goods; rules; special spaces for performance. We would add to this list the following: the inherent aspect of pleasure in both sports and theatre; the need for both competitors/actors and audience to ensure the legitimacy of the act; ability to get into a modified state of mind in order to play it right, attitude and comfort with novelty stimuli and situations. The essential characteristic element of theatre and sports is that, because of the inherent pleasure aspect, both of these forms of performance are denoted as “play” (Santhosh, Rajitha Menon, & Jayan, 2008).

Of course, there are also many differences, but the psychological essence is the same. Both theatre performance and sports performance include entering a creative zone of expression where all the skills acquired and developed start to have a meaning in front of an audience. For example, Edinborough (2012) examines the “liminoid nature of football and theatre”, finding many similarities between the tactical examples from football and approaches to improvisation developed by Johnstone. Berlin (2006) describes boxing as a form of theatre without words, an unscripted drama in which the athletes construct their narrative through their actions and their bodies. Of course, there is drama (Kreft, 2012), tragedy and even comedy in sports, but the central question is to focus on that dimension of the theatre that suits better sports. The answer is Improvisational Theatre.

Improvisation is not just a style or an acting technique; it is a dynamic principle operating in many environments and areas. It is an independent and transformative way of being, knowing and doing (Frost & Yarrow, 2016). Improvisational Theatre has emerged from the desire to find solutions to social issues, improve social behaviour and facilitate integration into American society for immigrants and the inclusion of unemployed people into work, and developed in the second half of the twentieth century in different countries (the United States and Great Britain), but almost simultaneously by two people: Viola Spolin (1985) and Keith Johnstone (1991), as a form of manifestation and equal measure, a work instrument, a training method for professional actors. If Viola Spolin brought the play to the actor's art and more specifically the theatrical plays, one of the first spectacular performances of the Improvisational Theatre (the '70s) was called TheatreSports, a term invented by Keith Johnstone and registered as a trademark by the International TheatreSports Institute.

2. Problem Statement

Responding to one of the primary needs of man – that of play and competition, sport is an ideal vehicle for all individual concepts and skills, having an educational role and giving each a path to self-improvement (Siperco, 1976). The American sociologist Neva Boyd has claimed in his works the benefits of the games (taken over and developed by Viola Spolin and underlying the Improvisational Theatre) and the fact that the game is not only a volunteer activity, but also a human necessity, adding that the structured, organized and supervised game requires intelligence, imagination, sensitivity, spontaneity, originality and productivity from those involved. Besides, according to Neva Boyd, the game is transformational, its dominant feature being that it gives the player the opportunity to automatically and unconsciously understand new things about themselves and others and can be a potent and useful tool in correcting behaviours (Simon, 2015).

Improvisational Theatre comes as support on the road to completion by facilitating access to emotions, insights and drives, enriching the process of being, becoming and perfecting in elite sports performance. Theatre has been used over the years as an essential vehicle for therapeutic interventions in clinical psychology. Examples in this sense are drama therapy and psychodrama.

The primary psychological principles of peak performance can be resumed in the following: (1) activation; (2) focus; (3) motivation and drive; (4) confidence; (5) training/preparation. An indicative for achieving elite performance has been associated with “being in the flow”, which means being lucid, clear-minded, alert, vigilant, but having the ability to face pressure and novelty. Also, elite performance in sports involves being solution-orientated, having the certainty and belief that it can be done, success can be achieved and that there are no unanswered issues. Last but not least, elite performance is about timing, space and rhythm, displaying spontaneous and automatic activity. Terry Orlick (2001), talking about focus, postulates that the best centre feels like a non-focus and most of the sports psychology literature talks about the importance of a clear mind in elite performance. All these are associated with concentrating on salient cues of the task, focusing on the “here and now”, on the immediacy of the moment, putting aside previous errors, mistakes or victories. As an athlete advances in experience, these become more difficult to achieve, as he/she carries with him/her all past experiences. Sometimes, the classical psychological interventions do not work anymore and we need a new stimulus to reactivate all the resources necessary for excellence.

When we relate to elite performers in sports, from a psychological point of view, we have to relate to the primary drives, to the first stimuli which have driven the person into the performance process. And these are play and fun. Jones (2005) states that, generally, children choose play, fun and excitement over winning, because enjoyment is more important to them. These are the essential elements for elite performers. As they walk towards excellence, they pay more and more attention to results, forgetting pleasure and also to enjoy learning, develop and become the best. Improvisational Theatre techniques are a reliable way to return to joy, to the keys for activating these resources.

Gologor (1979) states that there are very few things so delightful on the scene of elite sport performance as the respect, the dialogue and the understanding between players, one that does not require constant vocal support or inquiry, one in which each has managed to respect the others' needs and status without sacrificing their own. Improvisational Theatre principles support the beauty of sports, encouraging the mute, organic dialogue which provides mental strength and the focus and belief in personal performance.

3. Research Questions

The central research question is whether it is possible to create a supportive method of psychological assistance for elite athletes, inspired by the art of the actor and the Improvisational Theatre techniques.

4. Purpose of the Study

According to Marc Leveque (1993), mental preparation is the coordinated sum of direct or indirect, specific or non-specific procedures that are likely to improve the psychological potential of the athlete. A successful athlete is more committed and benefits from extensive mental preparation (Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002) and we would add that they are more open to new experiences. In the last 12 years, during the psychological assistance process, we have included step-by-step improvisation techniques, not as a training session in itself, but as a component of the mental preparation plan, mainly aiming to discharge pressure and create a productive and functional attitude towards performance.

Along the process, we have discovered that self-confidence and intrinsic motivation (pleasure and enjoyment) can be increased with the help of Improvisational Theatre techniques. Therefore, we have been encouraged by observation and feedback to explore more deeply.

The present paper aims to theoretically shape the IMPROSPORT method as a non-specific mental training tool, a supporting tool for the psychological preparation of Olympians and other elite athletes.

5. Research Methods

The research method proposed will be discussed in the Findings section.

6. Findings

6.1. Method proposed

Description of the technique: IMPROSPORT is a non-specific complementary mental training tool inspired by the art of the actor and the Improvisational Theatre and included in the psychological preparation of top athletes. This method has been shaped by bringing techniques specific to the art of the

actor into the mental training process of top athletes, focusing on the development of particular characteristics like: the ability of coping with new and stressful situations, maintaining focus, reactivating pleasure in sports, activating the courage of acting and taking decisions, the ability of entering the flow state of mind, staying in the present, in the “here and now” zone. IMPROSPORT has the same structure as a training session: warm-up exercises, exercises and skill training, cool-down.

The ABC of Improvisational Theatre translated into sports performance:

Accepting is one of the leading principles in Improvisational Theatre and is associated with embracing the offers made by other performers to advance the scene. This principle is essential in elite performance also because the athlete must enjoy competition and challenges and embrace any challenge offered by the opponent as an opportunity to extend personal limits and achieve excellence. The similarity is evident especially in sports that involve opponents, where athletes have a dialogue with their game partners (in fencing, judo, wrestling, tennis) or in team sports. In these cases, they have to see and respond to the fast exchanges, the unpredictable and the (technical or tactical) information conveyed during the game. Therefore, they have to embrace the challenge, the offer, to respond by adding something valuable and then to score. In cyclic or artistic sports, the athlete must accept the problems of the environment and the partner who competes at his/her side. Accepting is a crucial factor for coaches too. The coach must admit that each athlete is different. It is essential to allow what comes from each of the athletes, because this talks about the coach, but also about the coach-athlete relationship in the given context. Also, when translating the Improvisation Theatre principles into sports performance, the coach is recommended to accept that things are perceived from the angle, the position of the other, and therefore they have to work also considering the athlete’s perception of reality, because that is his/her truth. There is a big difference between “hearing” and “listening”. Also, it is crucial not to respond or act before listening carefully. Indecision and lack of enthusiasm dissipate energies and bury good ideas, but accepting an idea, even if it does not seem to go anywhere, is a decision that may turn into something useful: the first step to build together is to accept what the other offers you, even if you do not agree, you have not expected it, you do not know what to do with that content. It is important to put everything in contact into a coherent structure (everything that comes from everyone, what each can do). A matter felt by the athlete, when directed towards utility and efficiency, becomes a wealth and a resource. Both the athlete and coaches should be aware that everything that is offered is important, and the content can be adjusted and used in a suitable and efficient form of performance. Gaps and lack of information leave performance incomplete. Excellence is built with the athlete’s material and the art of the coach. For both the athlete and coach, it is important to look optimistically at what is happening and to find solutions for what is “here and now”. To say “NO” or to block the ideas of others is at hand, but the incredible freedom is offered by “YES”, which generates a flow of creativity and confidence in ourselves and the team, helping us grow.

Advancing: In improvisation, theatre means the process of moving the scene forward. In the language of the athlete, this can be translated by not focusing on mistakes, not trying too much to put into action their own mental scenario. Each game, each match, each exercise is a process that involves moving forward. When making a mistake, an error, the athlete must move on leaving it to the past and building the next “scene”. It is important, at least in competition, to make the previous action irrelevant. Once an action has passed, it is as if it had not happened at all (usually, a mistake). Also, when making a mistake, it is important to take the drive to see where it leads, while simultaneously raising the stakes. For coaches, these

principles can be translated by not entering into a power/dominance fight with the athlete. To be efficient with an elite athlete, a coach must accept and advance, finding “here and now” magic solutions for his/her needs. Each athlete must shine before the others, before the audience. An elite athlete does not necessarily act the way a coach desires. When the athlete shines, the coach will shine. Beyond all frustrations, tensions and inner difficulties, it is essential to adapt methods so that the athlete can react correctly, be able to progress and ultimately be able to shine. It is important for the athlete and coach to drive together on the road to excellence with all their confidence, adjusting and self-tuning efficiently until they reach their common goal! Improvisation has an obvious principle: you are not the one important, but your “stage” colleague. When you know how to raise the ball to the net, let him/her stand out, in fact, you are the one that stands out. In performance, it means that each of the two “actors”, coaches and athletes, must do so as to make the other activate all the inner resources necessary for performance and to help the other to be helped.

Breaking the routine: In Improvisational Theatre, language means interrupting an action with another action to advance the scene. In sports, it means fast exchanges when it does not work. It means disrupting the match, game or bout when an athlete is in disadvantage to restructure. Also, breaking the routine implies the courage to have initiative, to take decisions and make them count. It means the ability of taking responsibility and the inner drive to make everything count. For an athlete, breaking the routine means the courage of being, becoming and achieving excellence. For coaches, breaking the routine, at the elite level, means to take the responsibility of trying new things or reactivating old things. When working with elite athletes, the load becomes monotonous and so do the training sessions. It is crucial for a coach to remember that a brain stimulated with the same type of information will not perceive it anymore, will not respond to it anymore. To activate creativity, intuition and sparkle, it is essential to break the routine mainly in pre-competition stages of training.

Conflict: In theatre, many (but not all) scenes are about a conflict of some sort. If there is no conflict, the view is usually dull, because there is no excitement. In sports, the conflict has many meanings. On the one hand, it can be perceived as the difficulty of an exercise in artistic sports (an inner conflict, a fight with the athlete’s own limits, but in accordance with the other competitors). In cyclic sports, conflict is about personal challenge, and in other sports, about latent aggression. We have observed that, most of the time, elite athletes perform well when there is some conflict (either an inner or outer one). Conflicts are means for progress. In this sense, it is important not to fear conflicts, but cherish them as an opportunity for development, growth towards excellence. Also, open outer conflict provides information on the reality of relationships, which is very important for optimising things.

The main ideas regarding the relationship between sports performance and Improvisation Theatre, as formulated by the athletes included in the program, are:

- When competing, we look to the past and we go with confidence to the future, in ignorance, but with all the certainty of knowledge and experience.
- The plasticity of the mind is preserved by accepting the challenges, through creativity and the courage to expose yourself.

- Do not try to read the other's technique. In improvisation, as well as in fencing, the elements useful to reverse a situation for your own benefit are in the immediacy of the moment, in the "here and now" zone.
- Spontaneity can be practiced.
- Be present here and now!
- Diversity! Be careful not to fall into a routine! Explore new paths, new strategies, new responses to look with the same enthusiasm for your work, so that engagement in the activity is close to the maximum, without feeling so much effort.
- It is good to always focus on going beyond the limits of our comfort zone, causing our mind to think sideways.
- We continuously learn to act and react spontaneously according to each new situation!

It is important to be credible in what you do, even if you make a mistake.

Type of tool: Psychological assistance tool, non-specific mental training tool, supporting tool, skill development tool

Target group: The primary target group is made up of elite athletes. The secondary target group consists of coaches. In this sense, the information has to be adapted both for athletes and coaches. The method is appropriate for other categories of athletes aged over 14 and with the ability of transferring information from the Improvisational Theatre sessions into specific training and competition.

The aim of the tool: IMPROSPORT aims at the following objectives:

- Increasing the ability of staying in the present (neither thinking about past mistakes nor dreaming about a medal);
- Developing the ability to cope with novelty;
- Strengthening the ability to focus on solutions;
- Reinforcing overall team performance;
- Building self-confidence and trust in teammates;
- Accepting whatever it is and facing it;
- Developing reaction speed;
- Stimulating the courage of acting and taking decisions;
- Strengthening the ability of entering the flow state of mind.

6.2. Experience in using the tool

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; the pleasure of 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 (Play/Load). The athletes involved in this program were the members of the Olympic Epee and Sabre teams. 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 competitions, concluding that the transfer between the non-specific training (Improvisational Theatre training) and the specific sports preparation could be done successfully. The added

value of these training sessions involved attitude, flow, pleasure and decision-making. After the Olympic Games, the method was successfully experimented by dancers, junior fencers, elite sabre fencers, polo players and shooting athletes. When working with junior athletes, we observed that their fear of failure diminished significantly, and the results from the Lazarus Coping with Fear of Failure Scale and the SCAT (Sports Competition Anxiety Test) supported these observations. Concerning elite players, we observed that the early maladaptive schemas like abandonment, dependence/incompetence, mistrust/abuse (using the Young Schema Questionnaire) have changed from severe to medium, which correlated with the increased ability of taking risks, having initiatives and the courage of making decisions in both training and competition. In team sports, we observed changes in the team dynamics (observations supported by the results using the Belbin test and the sociogram). For each of the sports mentioned, we selected exercises similar to the particularities of the sport practiced, having the support of the coach or other specialists involved in the training process of the athletes. All these studies are presented in previous research studies and the doctoral thesis of the co-author.

6.3. Limitations

It is necessary for the coach to schedule time and space in the sports performance preparation plan for IMPROSPORT training sessions, which can be difficult, especially considering that this tool is more effective in the pre-competition training phase. Also, the coach, sports psychologist and improviser must agree on the objectives of both the team and each member. The coach and sports psychologist have an essential role in translating the basics of Improvisation Theatre into the sports language and facilitating the transfer of information into training and competition.

This method has proven not to be effective for athletes aged under 14, because their capacity of conscious transfer is not developed yet.

It has been proven to be more effective in sports which involve an opponent or a partnership/team.

6.4. Strengths

Beyond its specific goals, IMPROSPORT proves to be useful in reminding the athletes to have fun and enjoy the sports activity, reinforcing the fact that sport is not about every detail, every mistake, every individual, but about overall performance and the ability to face the unknown and focus only on solutions, not on the problem.

In this sense, IMPROSPORT is not only a skill development tool, but also an effective means to diminish pressure, increasing lucidity in highly tense periods in the training preparation program.

Also, it proves to be a useful skill development tool through laughter, not struggle.

6.5. Duration of the process

One IMPROSPORT training session had an average length of 90-120 minutes, including warm-up, skill development and cool-down.

To be effective, this method has to be used over at least eight training sessions for athletes aged 14-19 years. In adults or elite athletes, the training sessions do not involve a minimum. It depends on the objectives and the quality of translation between Improvisational Theatre and sports language, which

facilitates the transfer of knowledge and complementary training both into specific sports training sessions and competitions.

7. Conclusion

Improvisation Theatre is a beneficial method in sports, because it teaches athletes to use non-specific methods, basic concepts like flow, adaptation and being “here and now”, making decisions, having the courage to accept.

The critical factor for revealing the capabilities of each and lead them on the way to performance is to adapt the methods to each person, each athlete, avoiding the prescription of the same recipe to all of them. In this sense, it is essential to have a broad range of methods and techniques for the mental preparation of elite athletes. Bringing Improvisation Theatre into the sports performance area may be an opportunity for future development.

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