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**MENTAL TRAINING STRATEGIES FOR 3X3 WOMEN'S
BASKETBALL UNIVERSITY TEAMS**

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Abstract

We have proposed to present some aspects of mental training which resulted in winning the European Universities Women's Basketball Championship, from Coimbra, Portugal in July 2018. Mental training is considered a component of the whole educational and instruction process of the athlete in preparation not only for his general performances but also for sport competitions. Training and educational actions determine the enhancement of mental capacity which allows the athlete to attain efficient performance and to obtain peak results in competitions. The present paper underlines the main aspects that resulted in obtaining the above-mentioned performances. The present paper is a challenge that I managed to concretize with the title of 3x3 European Female Basketball Champion. Why I say it was a challenge, because as part of the university team of the University of Pitești we had 4 components of the Romanian 5x5 basketball team. Each of the four players have a strong personality, they are players who become leaders in club teams, have different styles of play and although some have played in 3x3 tournaments they are still 5x5 players. The preparation of this great result started before the national championship held at Bucharest. So we analysed the 3x3 European female basketball model, I was looking to choose the players in the basketball team of the university those players with a profile for the 3x3 game and they also had the highest value .

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1. Introduction

The athlete's capacity to bear significantly high values of volume and intensity of effort from long training sessions and the toughness of competitions represents first the consequence of mental training which builds his conscience, strengthens his character traits, disciplines his attitude and enhances his motivation.

Athletic activity of an individual begins in early school years and can finish at advanced maturation. However, the individual continues to be the athlete who has to be helped, changed and prepared regardless of age and experience (Glyn, 1992).

The main substance of training for a certain competition consists of knowing the conditions and particularities of opponents and the preparation of technical and tactic behaviours in relation to them.

Our case refers to 3x3 European Universities Women's Basketball Championship, where the team of the University of Pitești obtained the title of European Universities Champion, this being the best classification of a Romanian team to such competition (Epuran, Holdevici, & Tonita 2001).

This aspect of training targets the concrete modalities through which the athlete faces a certain way of the organized event and a certain opponent.

For European Universities Women's Basketball Championship, the team of University of Pitesti was made of by Elisabeth Pavel, Sonia Ursu, Dora Ardelean and Ioana Ghizilă, all of them students of the university.

2. Problem Statement

For important competitions, participants have to play first in qualification series and then they enter the events proper; some competitions develop in eliminatory series and others in the tournament system, which definitely imposes a training approach differentially. Within this women's competition, 6 countries took part, countries with strong basketball teams, such as Ukraine, Lithuania, Hungary, Portugal, etc. It followed the construction of the game tactics and numerous meetings with both the team psychologist and myself as a coach in which I sought to harmonize all four strong personalities who were the team. The first confirmation of the well-done work was to win the 3x3 female national basketball female title. At this championship I won out of all the other teams, creating the premises for the great performance. The basis of motivation seems to be a principle of biology, namely the principle of homeostasis. According to him, organisms tend to maintain the same state, a relatively constant balance, whatever the environmental changes. If this balance is disrupted, then the individual (the living being) reacts to restore it. In psychological terms, imbalances translate into the appearance of a need (water, food, heat, etc.). It is about losing a state of imbalance, usually caused by a lack. These must be either a native cause or occur in the course of existence (for example, the need to smoke) as the fruit of experience, culture and civilization. In other words, in the case of motivational processes, the concept of internal stimulus appears, which signals the existence of an imbalance in the degree of satisfaction / dissatisfaction of a need. If the reflective content of cognitive processes is the image or the word, affective processes are living, in terms of the level of motivation it is reflected by certain tendencies, impulses oriented towards the object or situation that restore balance. It is true, however, that the hypothesis that the reasons would not have a source in a deficit, is not verified in all cases. For example, in very young children, besides hunger, thirst, need for protection and

attachment, and homeostatic rooting, such as the tendency to know and explore the environment, the impulse to manipulate objects, the tendency to influence the environment. This is the effect of a surplus energy, not a deficit. Part of the strategy used to achieve this success was also the training of the 3x3 female basketball team alongside the masculine male both qualified at the European University Championships in Coimbra Portugal, 2018.

Very important was also the permanent presence of a psychologist beside the team together with the coach and the girls managed to overcome the main problems that arose on the run. Another problem presented in the paper was to make the girls aware of the game strategy and the place and the role of each in the team as a whole. I specified and according to the opponents encountered how to play the ideal game formulas at our team level. The parties were tough with teams from strong championships, France, Switzerland, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Croatia. Strategies were built according to each opponent and the potential of our team. At the 3x3 European European Women's Basketball Championship in Coimbra, Portugal, I won all the games and the semifinal with the champion last year was even harder than the final.

3. Research Questions

Hypothesis of the paper.

We suppose that if we use mental techniques in training and at the level of competitions for the 3x4 women's basketball team, we shall obtain superior outcomes in competitions.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the present paper is to present the main aspects of mental training which created the conditions for obtaining the title of Universities National Champions in 3x3 Women's Basketball

5. Research Methods

In this paper as research methods we used:

- a. studying the literature on the problem of psychological training in the 3x3 basketball game in girls;
- b. The pedagogical observation that consisted in analyzing the training and participation of the team with whom we came out European champion in Coimbra Portugal.

6. Findings

Mental monitoring for this 3x3 women's basketball team was represented by the objective evaluation of the athlete's psychological response to training and in competition in due time through investigations carried out along the preparation process (Martens , 2005).

It is aimed at optimizing the preparation and enhancement of performances through: cognizance of athletes' psychoindividual characteristics, comparison of different preparation stages from the point of view of psychological effects, cognizance of the evolution of psychological components that contribute to the enhancement of athletic performances, identification of certain errors and causes of failures in training and competitions and the setting of psychological intervention necessities (Epuran, Holdevici & Tonita, 2001).

Motivation is the main stimulus of athletic performances.

A motivated athlete or a motivated team gains success more rapidly, experiences competition with a high level of satisfaction and overcomes eventual failure easier. The psychologist, together with the coach and other members of the technical staff contribute decisively in motivating the athlete or the team in maintaining a performance atmosphere. An adequate mental training implies maintaining an optimal motivation from athletes, maintaining their implication in activities which would keep up their interest towards the activity to be prepared (Epuran, Holdevici & Tonita 2001). A competition implies a series of problems /challenges which affects self-assurance as a result of trying to overcome them. The key of the mental training in basketball is the manner in which players face these challenges Biddle & Mutrie 2003).

Another important aspect is the development of rituals, such as checking the attire of the athlete and obtaining in advance what the player needs and considers to be necessary for him.

Rituals are one of the best ways of preparing for competition because they: Offer rhythm. • Enhance familiarization with situations. • Determine the achievement of important aspects of training. • Build constancy in thinking. • Focus concentration. • Minimize distractions and negative thoughts. • Enhance self-control and self-assurance, reduces uncertainty. • Enhance the feeling that the match is just as any other match, it scarcely matters (Epuran, Holdevici & Tonita 2001). Rituals become habits gradually and once learned they are removed with difficulty. There is no such thing as an ideal ritual to be followed before the match. Each player should make a list with that she needs for the match, then elaborates a personal ritual and finally follows it everytime before every match (Martens, 2005). The issues before the match appear when the player feels the pressure of the match "floating", and she wants to quit (Famose, 1993). It is a kind of release, a get out of the situation and a protection of self-efficacy. Players are not motivated and this closeness frees them from stress load (Biddle & Mutrie 2003). Players begin to complain about surface, type of the ball, type of opponent, etc. Under these circumstances, the coach has to determine players to clearly understand that, despite excuses, training will continue until successful (Martens, 2005).

A good mental training have to:

- a. develop a previous plan which maintains players focused before match.
- b. develop constant rituals which should focus only on the future game.
- c. emphasize concentration and relaxation.
- d. accustom players to stand aside 20-30 minutes before the match in a quiet place.
- f. prepare players to develop the most tireless effort.

Anxiety refers to feeling and thoughts associated with uncertainty and concern. When a player interprets a given situation in a fearful way or in a "negative" manner, she begins to experience anxiety. Anxiety is defined as the result of the discrepancy between what players think they can do (abilities) and what they think they are expected to do (perceived demands of the situation). All players feel pressure when they take part in competitions. The difference is given by the way in which each player reacts to pressure (Glyn, 1992). Since anxiety is caused by the player's perception, in order to solve the problem it is important that the player should change her perception. She must try to change her perception of the situation from „threat" to „challenge".

Anxiety sources: Fear of failure: Ex. „What if I lose this game?". • inappropriate feelings: Ex. „I don't think I am able to play well today". • Complaints about physical state: Ex. „I feel very stiff". •

Manifestations of anxiety excess in basketball are presented in table 1.

Table 01. Modalities of manifesting anxiety in basketball

PHYSICAL	PSYCHOLOGICAL
Muscle tension, loss of coordination (muscles too tight). Low flexibility. Lack of stamina. Increased heart rate, shallow, irregular breathing. Weak legs (muscle weakness). Play rhythm is „unequal”.	Low concentration and difficulty in refocusing. Decreasing emotional control. Fear. Faulty strategy and tactic judgment (inadequate decisions). Renouncement – players stop trying. Everything seems to develop too fast. Inability to think clearly and accurately. Negative thinking and self-criticism. Pessimistic persistent direction about future.

Unlike the above-mentioned aspects, at the opposite pole, basketball players also manifest the opposed situations of subactivation, presented as it follows (Table no. 2).

Table 02. Modalities of manifesting subactivation in basketball

PHYSICALLY	PSYCHOLOGICALLY
Players experience a decrease in energy. They feel weak They feel leg discomfort: don't jump. Move slowly: weak preparation. Head and shoulders down. Blank eyes: looks outside the court. Physically, player looks idle.	Lack of preoccupation about how well they will play. Distracted; low concentration. Insufficient patience and the feeling „I don't care”; without warmth. Lack of anticipation and of timing. Signs of defection and helplessness.

First of all, players must have theoretical knowledge about states of nervous arousal and anxiety.

It is practically impossible to eliminate the pressure of different situations in basketball games (Martens, 2005). However, players can practice and suppress the manner in which they can overcome the feelings of anxiety generated by these situations (Glyn, 1992). Under these circumstances, in compliance with the high level of demands of the 3x3 European Universities Women's Basketball Championship, in order to obtain a high emotional control of players, we used the following proceedings to increase activation both physically and psychologically, as grouped and presented in table 3.

Table 03. Modalities of increasing activation in basketball

PHYSICALLY	PSYCHOLOGICALLY
Keep legs moving. Increase breath frequency through deep and short breath. Act energetically. Create the most convincing image that you play the best basketball of your life.	Use positive phrases: „Come on”, „yes, that is right”, etc. Use words that can help: „tough”, „fast”, „quick”, etc. Consider situation as a challenge. • Try to apply 100% effort. Think about things which produce energy. Listen to lively music, loudly. As last effort, get angry.

In order to reduce players' anxiety and keep them in a good physical and psychological condition, we used the following techniques (table no. 4).

Table 04. Modalities of reducing physical and psychological anxiety of basketball players

PHYSICALLY	PSYCHOLOGICALLY
Relax arms, neck and palm muscles, contracting and then releasing muscle tension. Understand the signals of your body: do not interpret a “ rapid heartbeat” wrongly” (which is a sign you are not prepared) as being a sign of stress. Try rather the easy than the hard way. Practice breath control (take a slow breath by breathing deeply). Expire when you shot at the basket Smile when you feel stress. Shake your hands, shoulders and neck; create a powerful mental and physical image/ ritual: show that you are confident, calm and under control	Admit that you begin to feel nervous. However, do not ever be afraid to become nervous because it is a sign you are in the game and you care. Treat situation with a normal reaction, manage it really. Use relaxation techniques: progressive relaxation, autogenic training Use supportive key words: „detach”, „relax” Focus on things you can control. Concentrate upon the play and do your best. Stay in the present, set a specific goal for every point and situation. Do not think “I should not crack”. Do not think negative. Feel well: see the funny side of a situation and have a positive and constructive attitude in front of adversity. When pressure increases, be more aggressive and play basketball. Play to win rather than play not to lose. Leave mistakes behind. • Set a good game plan and stick to it. Listen to slow music, quietly.

Self-confidence means that the player expects success or failure. Confidence represents the belief that someone can attain a desired behaviour in a given situation successfully.

The most important factor which makes the difference between a great success and little success is confidence (Famose, 1993). Performant players show powerful self-confidence in their abilities. Players will realize that it is easier for them to believe in themselves than others (like coach) might do.

Confidence induces positive emotions and thinking, facilitates concentration, determine players to choose more challenging objectives, increases persistency and effort, affects selection of the shot and psychological moment, and determines the player to be more optimistic and realistic. Obviously, there is a close connection between technical skills and confidence (Famose, 1993).

In order to face challenges of competition, even if the players of 3x3woman's basketball team had a considerable experience, we used a set of techniques and exercises as it follows:

Technique 1 Use a positive self-dialogue :

Self-dialogue is a process of internal thinking. There are two types of self-dialogue: positive and negative. The positive one has a dramatic influence over the player's reactions in adversity situations and affects future actions and feelings directly. Players' answer to the outcomes of a match depends on the way they interpret the respective game. There are different manners to use self-dialogue:

- a. to acquire ability.
- b. to eliminate bad habits.

c. to initiate action.

d. to sustain effort.

Technique 2

Use own questions such as: When do personal doubts appear?, How does a player recover after a mistake?, Am I afraid to use certain shots?, Do I reckon to play well?, How do I react to adversity?, Does my confidence change during the game?, When I am over-confident?, Do I like tough and closely contested games?

Other techniques

Use imaginal and visualization and go over videos with your best performances.

Try to profess a confident image on the court: head high, shoulders pulled back, and facial muscles relaxed (Epuran, Holdevici, & Tonita, 2001).

Think positive and with assurance (using self-dialogue) and your body will react in a more confident manner.

Work out for a good physical condition: increase your physical strength and endurance.

Work hard to improve other deficiencies of mental abilities.

Set your rituals before the game. Play with good players not with superior ones.

7. Conclusion

Physical abilities can be learned and improved if they are practised regularly in the court and outside it. Basic mental abilities necessary for the tournament game include: motivation, concentration, thoughts control, emotional control. Coaches can help in developing a player's motivation through rewarding effort/hard work rather than specific abilities. Two techniques had been mainly used for enhancing motivation: entertaining moments in 3x3 basketball and goal setting. The modalities to enhance activation include both physical strategies (powerful moves, deep breathing) and psychological ones (the use of positive sentences). The modalities to reduce anxiety also include physical strategies (relaxation, smile) and psychical ones (the use of key words, focus on a single point at a certain time). A moderate level of confidence ensures the highest level of performance, while low or very high levels of confidence tend to produce low performance levels. The techniques used to increase self-confidence include: the use of positive self-dialogue, setting and achievement of realistic goals, etc. The above-mentioned techniques allowed us to maintain concentration at the players of 3x3 womens' basketball team and to win 3x3 European Universities Women's Basketball Championship from Coimbra, Portugal.

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