

10 Top Tips for Enhancing Sport Performance

It's often the case that coaches believe they need a degree or years of study to come close to understanding and applying sport psychology to their athletes. And if you want to become a 'sport psychologist', or it's an area that's particularly fascinating to you and you want to draw on the wide range of theories there are on offer, then a degree might just be the thing for you.

However, as busy coaches, because you know sport psychology is important, you take opportunities to study the area in 'short courses' that often just reinforce your belief in how vital sport psychology is, but often walk away not knowing how to apply that knowledge. You recognise the issues with your players and are missing the techniques to deal with them. This is just one way in which neurolinguistic programming (NLP) fits in, to offer a more practical approach to sport psychology that integrates with a coach's existing toolbox, without having to spend years of formal study to do so.

The use of NLP in sport is both successful and wide-ranging in its application. Here, Louise Deeley, Managing Director of Inside Performance Consulting Ltd, looks at a few of the things you can be aware of and do right now to put your athletes, players and teams on the path to success...

1 Know Your Outcome

This is one of the most well-known principles of NLP and is based on the understanding that when we're clear about what exactly it is we want to achieve, we'll be more successful in doing so. Having well-defined outcomes creates focus and direction for coaching so athletes can achieve desired results in a clear and unambiguous way.

Not many people in sport need to be told the importance of goal setting, but you'll be surprised at how many people set goals they never achieve, achieve too easily, or never really wanted to achieve in the first place!

It's not just about setting long-term goals either; know your outcome for the day or for the training session ahead. How much more productive are you when you're certain of what's happening in your next training session?

2 Be Flexible

It's often the case in sport that we think by putting an extra bit of effort into the same thing, we'll get a different result.

We all have preferred and natural ways of doing things and, for the most part, we may have been successful with that strategy. What happens when we realise that one size doesn't fit all? The solution isn't found by increasing the effort – it's about adding tools to the toolbox that give us the option to change the way we work so that when changes need to be made, they can be.

How many alternative methods do you have in your coaching or performing toolbox?

3 Pay Attention to What You're Doing and What You're Aware of

When playing sport, the majority of our performance is on autopilot, it's happening at the unconscious level. As a coach, it can be easy to identify things that contribute to a great performance through experience and knowledge of the game but sometimes it's that elusive thing outside of conscious awareness (unconscious) that makes the difference.

Paying attention to what you're doing and the results you're getting is vital to know how you do what you do when things go well. Start to notice those 'unconscious' feelings, thoughts, your physiology, and feedback from others and the great results achieved with them. It then provides you with a platform for comparison to those times that haven't gone so well and ensures you're in the right state to perform at the right time.

4 Learn How to Control Your State

It's often the way, especially in sport, that the moment we enter into competitive situations, we're a victim of our own emotions. Nerves, anxiety, stress, fear, or even a lack of motivation often kick in and we feel there is nothing we can do about it but play on through.

One of the major premises of NLP is to understand how our thoughts and feelings affect the way we behave and therefore perform.

When you realise that we have 100% control over how we think, how we hold ourselves physically and how quickly that can change the way we feel, you start to notice how much more control you have over your emotions than you originally thought.

Want to feel increased levels of confidence? Take a moment to think back to a time when you felt totally confident...go back to that time and, as you do, really notice everything you saw, felt and heard...model the way you held yourself in that moment and really feel those feelings of total confidence.

5 Work from a Psychology and Physiology of Excellence

Take a moment to think about how the manager, coach or athlete you most admire holds him/herself physically when he/she performs. Imagine how he/she thinks and what he/she believes about him/herself to perform the way he/she does...now model those behaviours in your own performance.

Acting 'as if' you possess those same characteristics your idol has will ensure you're taking on a psychology and physiology of excellence and it eventually becomes a familiar state in your neurology.

If we operate from excellence, we'll always be in the right frame of mind and body and will have the best possible chance of getting the results we want.

6 Recognise Your Beliefs and Values

Our beliefs and values shape our understanding of why things are possible or impossible for us. They provide us with the rationale and drive for our actions.

So the question is: what do you believe about your capabilities, career, or even your own relationship with success that is driving your current behaviour?

In sport, the one thing we know we can control is ourselves and how we think. So it's important to know which beliefs are moving you towards your goals and which are limiting you in achieving them.

How different would it be if you accessed the positive intentions behind those limiting beliefs you hold and achieved those intentions with beliefs that move you forwards and not just sideways?

7 Learn How to Use Mental Rehearsal to Greater Effect

When thinking about mental rehearsal, the majority think of **visualising** positive performance. To get the most out of mentally rehearsing performance, its key to access not just the way it looks but the way it **sounds** and **feels** too. Our mind doesn't know the difference between what's real or imagined and to simulate the way performance looks, what you hear, and what you feel in that moment will further strengthen that experience in your neurology – making it habitual.

When mentally rehearsing next or with your athlete, start to introduce all your senses (sight, sound, feelings) into the process.

8 Reframe Your Thinking

Reframing or changing the way we think about a person, situation or event is a simple yet powerful conversational tool that can positively influence our own or someone else's outlook, feelings and, ultimately, performance.

Take the player who feels under 'constant surveillance' from her coach. How different would that player's perception be if someone told her that perhaps the coach considers her to be 'the one to watch' for captaincy next season?

Simple change in meaning = positive change in the player's confidence.

Or the manager whose outlook on the next match is: 'It will be very difficult; with the opposition's current form, we'll find it tough to win.'

How different do you think the performance from his team would be if he said: 'We have an opportunity to win everything, and looking at the way we've played recently, I'm very confident we can beat them?'

Take a moment to think how many more possibilities there are for you when you change the meaning or context of any current negative experiences, behaviours or comments you hear around you. After all, possibilities will always move you further forward than limitations ever will.

9 Learn to Relax

It's important to switch off from time to time to recharge for the next performance. A key NLP technique that can help us achieve this is using Milton Model language patterns. This is language that is artfully vague that allow us to open our minds and expand our options for thinking. This can be on a basic level or more advanced in the form of hypnosis.

Use your preferred method of relaxation and, once relaxed, begin to let your mind wander to positive experiences. If you're a coach, make positive suggestions to your athletes when they're in this state. It's amazing how much positivity your unconscious mind absorbs when your conscious mind is switched off.

10 Feedback is a Gift

When thinking about paying attention to what we do, feedback plays a vital role in helping us to know what works and what needs changing in our performance.

Sometimes we spend so long focusing on what needs to be changed because of how passionate we are about getting it right, we forget to highlight the things that went well. Start to get used to praising good performance. It reinforces what went well for your athletes and gives them a marker to hold on to next time. Find ways to communicate what needs improving that are palatable and leave your players with an overall statement on the performance that's motivating for them.

Equally, if you or your player finds it hard to receive praise, give more of it to get used to it. Everyone needs an understanding of what it means to have performed correctly; otherwise, we'd never know what to change or keep the same.

About the Author

Louise Deeley is a BPS Chartered Sport and Exercise Psychologist, a BASES Sport and Exercise Scientist and Managing Director of Inside Performance Consulting Ltd. Previously a senior lecturer in sport psychology at Roehampton University, Louise is also a successful performance coach, Master Practitioner and Trainer of NLP, a Master Trainer of Time Line Therapy™ and a clinical hypnotherapist.

Further details can be found at:
www.inside-performance.com
or email: info@inside-performance.com