

Mental Performance in Athletics (Part 1)

Dr. Leo Lewis

I've been in the Twin Cities for about 35 years. And that's by design. At the same time, I didn't grow up here. I grew up in Missouri.

But I have a pretty good story as we lead up to this topic. I have an eclectic style of education. I had my master's degree in education from University of Missouri. I grew up in Missouri. And I finished up with a PhD in kinesiology here at the University of Minnesota.

But my passion has always been sport. I had a father who was a professional football player. My mother was a physical education teacher. And they both were educators.

And I grew up in that whole sound mind and sound body atmosphere where education was critical. And fortunately, having a dad who was a professional athlete, I certainly became fond of participating in sports on every level and, at the same time, tried to get involved with all the sports that I could when I was a kid. So it became a really good atmosphere to have a father who was an athlete and then also have a mother who taught physical education principles in elementary school.


So I think one of the reasons why I'm here-- I present the whole notion of chiropractic students to start-- those of you who are interested in Northwestern, about the whole notion of when you're with clients who are probably engaging in some injuries or those types of function problems with their bodies, do you ever consider the mental part of it, the emotional part of having an injury or dealing with some of those circumstances where pain and lack of function in your body is apparent? And I think one of the things that I've always been accurate on is that we go through these emotional self-taught notions of how is our body, how is it functioning on a daily basis?

I want to give you a little bit about background. Certainly, I didn't grow up here. I grew up in Missouri and participated in several sports.

Football ended up being my best sport. I was a high school athlete who ended up getting an academic scholarship at the Division I level at the University of Missouri and became a football player there and wasn't drafted, but a lot of my teammates were. A lot of my teammates were.

At the same time, I lasted longer than them in the NFL. I ended up becoming a free agent with the Minnesota Vikings a long time ago. Bud Grant was my coach. And at the same time, I was able to last 13 years in professional football, 11 with the Minnesota Vikings.

You notice I'm not 6' 5", 280 pounds. Because of my stature, I was always keen on figuring out, when and where am I going to have this alternative career built? And because my parents were educators, I decided to continue with one of my passions, and that was sport kinesiology, sport



science. And since I graduated at the University of Missouri, I followed my wife to the University of Tennessee-- and she was a veterinary medicine resident at the time-- and started my master's degree in physical education at the time. And when I finished there, I moved up here to Minnesota full-time and started my PhD in kinesiology.

Now, the one thing that I was interested in was how professional athletes transition out of becoming no longer professional athletes because it becomes a very emotional and catastrophic, in some cases, issue for them. And then also, there was not a lot of literature on the transition of athletes to a higher level or to the next career, whether they were college athletes who finished their college career and never played professionally or whether they were professional players. In this case, I studied professional football players, whether they ended their career in injury or at a time when they wasn't expecting it or whether they just got tired of it and just didn't have the skills no longer to compete.


There was this particular time that they had in this transition that was similar to normal retirement transition issues for folks who are in their 60s, but this occurred between their mid-20s and mid-30s. So there are similar research-oriented principles that we could tack onto athlete transition. After I started that, there became this new-found area of sport science and it was called sport psychology.

Although some of the principles, the educational principles of sport psychology have always been there-- athletes have always been [AUDIO OUT] by their friends, by interested professionals. Athletes have always had that support system in place. And one of the things that I think sport psychology and what we call sport psychology has done over the years and theoretical principles regarding how do you help [AUDIO OUT] between licensed folks and educational folks. So now, most of us who aren't licensed practitioners call ourselves mental performance consultants because the term "psychology," it's protected. Those of us who are not licensed people cannot use that name.

So we're going to have some introduction into sport psychology, some of the principles, some of the highlighted approaches to serving athletes at this particular time. And then we'll talk about injury as it relates to supporting athletes and non-athletes who are injured and understand their emotional and cognitive appraisal of their injury. And I'm hoping that this will help you in the future relating to athletes or those who are physically active and how they appraise their injury, how they work with you in resolving their dilemmas and getting well as clients.

And then I'll ask for some questions at the end. So this is really destined to be an overview of some of the strategic pieces in sport psychology or mental performance. And then hopefully, we'll have an opportunity to have a case or two to review.

And then we'll talk about a model that I think is one of the best models out there, even though it's over 20 years old. For Dr. Stark, I'll provide the original article on that. But then also, we'll look at some of that model. And I think you have a handout on that model.



And this model was presented as well as fashioned by one of my colleagues, Diane Wiese-Bjornstal at the University of Minnesota and her colleagues and has really been now morphed into other areas of practice. But I wanted to make sure that you had the original models for us to go over. And I will provide the original article to Dr. Stark for you if you want to read that and have that in your library.

So applied sport and exercise psychology started in really professionally in the early 1980s. And it's always been a matter of looking at this sport science section theory, research and an applied notion of sport and physical activity. And the goal is just very simple, to facilitate optimal involvement, performance, and enjoyment in sport and exercise. So when you talk about enjoyment, it doesn't necessarily mean that it's just for athletes. It's for anyone who's physically active.

Sport and exercise psychology, you will find individuals who practice in this area or who benefit athletes in this area either do it through individual or group consulting or counseling. They derive a clinical approach or educational approach. And we're going to look at more of the educational approach today, although there are a number of clinical aspects that we will look at briefly.


So the best association in this continent, North America, and certainly is known internationally by all of us practitioners, is the Association of Applied Sport Psychology. It's the largest sport and exercise psychology professional organization in North America. And it does offer certification.

And I was at one time a certified mental performance consultant. And I've decided in my waning years as a consultant that I'm not going to go through that anymore, but that's OK. That's OK for me.

But at the same time, there are other factions in North America and around the world that certify or license individuals who have this expertise. The American Psychological Association has a division 48 that provides expertise for psychologists. United States Olympic Committee has a group of individuals who are licensed and they are licensed through their psychology registry, as well.

But one of the things that I think we need to look at is, what is sport, anyway? And sometimes it's defined in different ways depending on how you look at it. I come from a more social/cultural vantage point when I look at sport and what it provides as a social practice for us who engage in physical activity.

The one adopted by AASP is that sport is "all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organized participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels." So it's pretty comprehensive. So it doesn't necessarily mean that it encompasses everyone, but what it says about sport is that it's competitive, that it's organized, that it deals with all types of physical



activity, whether you're a walker or whether you actually compete at the highest level in your sport.

Another definition is sport could be, "any competitive physical activity that is guided by established rules." So it does become a little bit more finite in that it looks at activity that is more organized, has rules, is governed, has some sort of institutionalized notion of what people do when they engage in this activity. And what I mean by "institutionalized--" I mean that it's really incumbent of the organization that provides these 40 practices that it have some hierarchical nature to it. So we can talk about intercollegiate athletics, professional sports, high school sports, for example, youth sports in some confines, whether it's AAU or some of our community rec leagues, for example. These are all institutionalized natures of sports, whether it's at a for fun or enjoyment standpoint or whether it's really serious like you might find with club sports or travel teams.

Why services through mental performance? So we're getting a bit more focused on why someone like yourself might be interested in providing mental performance acumen or strategies for your clients. Maybe an athlete is trying to stay focused through a competition or lacks the confidence during practice and games and needs some help in cognitively looking at how to improve themselves. Maybe they want a competitive edge on either their competition or to improve their own skills.

They're concerned with a child's experience in organized sports. So a family with the child could come to a practitioner such as a mental performance consultant to understand and get some support in that area. Athletes may be struggling to begin or continue an exercise program. So you may find that. And many of us maybe have encountered this, where we start a jogging program or a weight loss program and for some reason, we just don't do it as fast or enough that we did-- like we did earlier in our thought process.

And then an athlete may have a loss in confidence or motivation after an injury. So we've seen it. We've seen it where these injuries really point to, for an athlete, their self-confidence, their identity. And sometimes they rethink or reframe what this injury means to them.

The significance of applied sport psychology approach where you're actually becoming a fixture in a person's life, where they use you to help gain an advantage or improve their performance in whatever activity they want-- athletes have acknowledged that working with professionals in the field is evident. We see increased media attention about this. Even some of our local athletes have mentioned that they've worked with individuals in these fields. Coaches at the high school and university levels seek to help their teams by maybe using someone to help in a team building circumstance or to help in developing a emotional and cultural improvement plan for their teams.

Professional and Olympic athletes have also discussed mental training as a part of their training. And in most cases, these professional teams and these Olympic teams do have as part of their organization individuals who are licensed in these areas. Even psychologists, exercise specialists,

athletic trainers, even chiropractic students can use the knowledge and apply these techniques to increase effectiveness of their clients. But there is a compound of other clinical issues that we won't talk about today that are certainly evident.

Athletes are no different than you and I in terms of how we deal with the world and see the world. And oftentimes, we struggle with some of these aspects of our lives. Anxiety management, attention control, communication, goal setting, imagery, self-talk, team building and time management are issues that are non-clinical, meaning they don't necessarily require someone licensed to be able to help an athlete or someone who needs them to improve. So we will talk about these notions of mental performance.

Those that we don't or won't talk about today are issues such as anxiety disorders, other types of disorders regarding mood and eating, and some of those clinically-based notions of humankind. So although this is a part of enhancement, it could be a part of enhancing performance, we won't talk about that today. Also included are depression issues, alcohol and drug abuse, sexual abuse, violent behavior, things that we've seen all too much in the popular media nowadays-- certainly affects our culture and certainly will affect people who are engaging in sport and physical activity.

A performance enhancement consult, someone like me, is a professionally trained in sport and exercise science, but is not a licensed psychologist or a licensed counselor. So can anyone do this? No, not necessarily. But it does require some training.

Association of Advanced Sport Psychology does require an advanced degree at the very least. And I think they've certainly required that even if you're not in sport and physical activity or not trained in kinesiology, for example, they do require that you have a certain amount of hours training individuals and do research in the area to a certain extent. And this performance enhancement consultant provides individual or group consultations geared towards performance-related issues.

One of the things that really made me decide to get in this area was that when I was a counselor-- I played 11 years for the Vikings. But then after that, I worked in the front office with the Vikings. I was a pro scout. But then I also managed a player development program.

And through that player development program, we made available opportunities for athletes to attune to some of the need base activities that the NFL provided for players. One of them was a consultative area of work that we could provide for players. And it dealt with personal development, certainly the notion of trying to gain more academic work and graduate from college. But one of the things that I felt I was lacking at the time was the ability to view or counsel these athletes on a humanistic level.

So I ended up going back-- after my PhD, I went back to get a master's degree in marriage and family therapy so I can understand the whole counseling routine and some of the theoretical vantage points to helping athletes. And it really did help me understand what athletes were going through. Yes, I was one. Some of my strange yet difficult aspects of being a professional athlete didn't particularly deal with performance, but for many of our athletes, it did.

And it doesn't necessarily have to deal with performance. It can deal with relationships, identity. And some of those things really are important for a lot of athletes.

So then talking about anxiety management, for example, one of the pillars of what I believe sport psychology performance enhancement is all about is really avoiding overarousal and also underarousal. So one of the things that we can use as a tool is to work with athletes to make sure that they are more composed in competition. And from a theoretical perspective, I always use this inverted U hypothesis diagram. Looks like a hill.

And so it's framed on an axis where the vertical axis deals with the volume. The horizontal axis is more about time and intensity. And at the top of the inverted U is where performance is optimal.

And if you get overaroused or underaroused, then performance, in essence, will lessen. So there is a certain point in a person's experience where their performance levels can be optimal. But if they get too aroused or more or less composed or underaroused, then their performance won't necessarily be optimum.

So there is an opportunity to-- again, this is a educational strategy, as well, to be able to get an athlete to understand what happens to them when they start sweating or get nervous or have an opportunity to use self-talk, in this case, to get them less aroused so they can perform better. Another way to make them get more aroused is to use that old term "psyching up," whether you can use it with words or cues or to get a social support mechanism in place where a person can get more aroused so that they can perform at their optimum. But there are ways to do that. And most important thing is that-- the target is to really be more effective and to make sure that optimal levels of performance are maintained or attained.

Also, some of the techniques that you can use to either keep a person aroused at a optimum level is to use mental relaxation training, stress management training, biofeedback, where you use electrical devices to provide data about heart rate and muscle activity, concentrate and use strategies for breathing control, as well, and thought-stopping techniques. Because sometimes, it is all about the mental acumen. It is all about how you think about what you're getting ready to get yourself into.

Concentration and attention control, focusing on one's awareness on relevant cues so that performance intensity is maintained-- and I'd always think about these things when I was also performing at a high level, whether I used these or not. And to a certain extent, I used them and didn't even know that I was using them. But at the same time, I think one of the things we have to think about when we talk about mental performance-- we're talking about, really, working with individuals who are well-intentioned, are not psychotic, for example, are pretty well-trained, but still need that edge, still need a strategy here or two in certain circumstances to make sure that they can perform well in those circumstances.

So some of the techniques is that in practice, you can manufacture distractions so that you're used to them when it comes in competition. You can use cue words like, "Let's get psyched" or other cue words that make you remember to be attentive to your concentration. You can establish routines.

Sometimes people do this in pre-competition warm-up. Oftentimes, they may do it in between sections throughout a competition. But there's other types of cues that are used throughout the routine. And a technique, then, where you say focused on the present-- and oftentimes, a person can establish cues at particular times during a competition or in this case, have cues that will remind you to do other things.