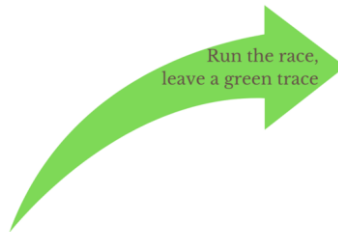


SPORT PSYCHOLOGY for ENDURANCE and EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT of ATHLETS

Project number: 101133603, Project acronym: SPEED



D2.1 Methodology for the coaches to design and implement sports psychology tools and methods in the athlete's preparation and improve the performance



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¹ The final version of the Methodology will be finalized following the feedback received from the Second Training Event planned in the Project



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1. Introduction

The SPEED project is a collaborative initiative between the Sport Club for Athletics “Athletic” and the Rijeka Sports Association, aimed at advancing the field of sports training and psychology.

The SPEED Project addresses four specific objectives:

SO1: To enhance the skills of Sport Clubs Team to apply an effective physical and mental training programs;

SO2: To enhance the skills of the athletes to apply an effective self-preparation programmes for mental training;

SO3: To attract new participants with fewer possibilities to practice sport;

SO4: To establish international networking cooperation with institutions in the field of sport.

Trough comprehensive approach the project involves diverse target groups, including 30 sports clubs, managerial and coaching staff, 160 amateur athletes aged 7 to 29, 30 disadvantaged participants, their parents, and 30 sports organizations, along with four training and research institutions.

The expected outcomes of the SPEED project include enhanced expertise and knowledge within sports clubs, improved training program implementation, increased athlete proficiency in mental training, greater participation among disadvantaged groups, promotion of healthy lifestyles, and the establishment of robust international sports networks. Through these efforts, the SPEED project aims to foster a more inclusive and effective sports environment, benefiting a wide range of participants and stakeholders.

The concept of SPEED involves two core activities to be organised and held: 1. Trainings to exchange knowledge and practices if the field of sports training programmes and sport psychology and 2. Establishing international networking cooperation with institutions in the field of sport. In contemporary sports coaching, acknowledging the significance of sports psychology is important for optimizing athlete performance and achieving sustained success.

This methodology provides an insightful overview of the pivotal role that sports psychology plays in athlete preparation and performance enhancement and can support the coaches in their everyday work with athletes alongside the sport-specific training.

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Sports psychology constitutes a fundamental aspect of modern coaching methodologies, recognizing the intricate relationship between an athlete's mental state and their on-field performance. Beyond physical prowess, an athlete's mental preparedness is often the differentiating factor in achieving peak performance levels and maintaining consistency in competitive environments.

2. Importance of mental preparation

The concept of mental preparation goes beyond classical physical training regimens, embodying a holistic approach to athlete development. It encompasses a range of psychological factors, including focus, confidence, resilience and stress management, which together influence an athlete's ability to perform optimally under pressure. Effective mental preparation equips athletes with the psychological resilience to face challenges, overcome setbacks, and seize opportunities during high-stakes competition. By cultivating a positive mindset and fostering mental toughness, athletes can reach their full potential and achieve peak results even in the face of adversity. Recognizing the importance of mental preparation, coaches play a key role in integrating the principles of sports psychology into their coaching practice. Through structured methodologies and targeted interventions, coaches can empower athletes to develop the psychological skills necessary for success, ultimately maximizing their performance capabilities and facilitating long-term athletic growth and achievement.

Mental preparation is an aspect of athletic training that is frequently neglected, often left solely to the discretion of individual athletes. While recognized as essential, it is often inadequately integrated into formal training programs. Instead, coaches may express a desire for athletes to exhibit traits such as confidence, concentration, and motivation without providing structured support for their development. On the contrary, physical and technical-tactical (te-ta) preparation are meticulously incorporated into training programs. These aspects are carefully planned, executed, and programmed to the last detail, leaving nothing to chance. Coaches ensure that physical training regimens are systematically designed to enhance athletes' strength, agility, and technical proficiency, with progress regularly assessed and tracked. However, the same level of attention and rigor is not consistently applied to mental preparation. This disparity in treatment perpetuates a disconnect between the acknowledged importance of mental readiness and the actual resources allocated towards its development. As a result, athletes may not receive the necessary support and guidance to cultivate the psychological resilience and skills required for optimal performance.

Addressing this disparity requires a paradigm shift in coaching practices, where mental preparation is accorded the same level of priority and systematic integration as physical and technical-tactical training. By recognizing the integral role of mental readiness in athletic

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success and incorporating it into comprehensive training programs, coaches can empower athletes to unlock their full potential and achieve consistent, high-level performance.

3. Psychological Preparation in Track and Field

Track and field athletics demand not only physical prowess but also mental fortitude to excel in highly competitive environments. This section outlines a comprehensive approach to psychological preparation tailored specifically for track and field athletes.

3.1 Psychodiagnostics assessment

Before embarking on any psychological preparation program, it is essential to conduct a thorough psychodiagnostics assessment. This evaluation helps identify individual athlete's psychological strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. Through various assessments, such as personality tests, stress coping mechanisms, and performance mindset evaluations, coaches can gain valuable insights into the psychological profiles of their athletes. (*see Annex 1 to this Methodology*)

3.2 Education

Education forms the cornerstone of effective psychological preparation. Athletes, coaches, parents, and support staff must be educated on the significance of sports psychology and its impact on athletic performance. Workshops, seminars, and educational resources can be utilized to impart knowledge on mental skills training, goal setting, visualization techniques, and stress management strategies.

3.3 Development of basic skills

The initial phase of psychological preparation focuses on the development of fundamental mental skills essential for track and field athletes. These skills may include concentration, self-confidence, goal setting, and relaxation techniques. Coaches employ structured training sessions and drills to cultivate these foundational skills, laying the groundwork for more advanced psychological development.

3.4 Development of more advanced and individualized set of skills

As athletes progress in their training, the focus shifts towards the development of more advanced and individualized psychological skills tailored to their specific needs and performance objectives. This phase may involve personalized coaching sessions, one-on-one consultations, and specialized interventions to address specific psychological challenges and enhance performance under pressure.

3.5 Implementation of learned skills to competitions

The ultimate test of psychological preparation lies in the ability of athletes to apply learned skills effectively during competitions. Coaches work closely with athletes to integrate psychological strategies into their pre-competition routines, race-day preparations, and in-event performance. Visualization, self-talk, and stress management techniques are practiced and refined to optimize performance outcomes on the track. (*see Annex 2 to this Methodology*)

3.6 Evaluation of the Psychological Preparation program

Continuous evaluation is integral to the success of any psychological preparation program. Coaches assess the effectiveness of the program by monitoring athlete performance, collecting feedback, and analysing psychological data. Adjustments and refinements are made based on the outcomes of evaluation, ensuring that the program remains dynamic and responsive to the evolving needs of the athletes.

Psychological preparation in sport aims to go beyond mere motivational pep talks or surface-level interventions. Instead, it delves into the realm of evidence-based practices that have been rigorously studied and validated within the field of sports psychology. These techniques are not only theoretically sound but also empirically proven to enhance athletic performance and well-being. By integrating psychological techniques into their training and competition routines, athletes gain the tools to manage stress, regulate emotions, maintain focus, and build confidence. Through structured interventions such as goal setting, visualization, cognitive restructuring, and mindfulness, athletes cultivate mental resilience and develop the psychological attributes necessary for success in their respective sports. The main goal of psychological preparation in sports is the use of psychological techniques that have a clear theoretical background and are based on scientific evidence to help athletes maximize their mental skills, consistently give the best results during competition and ultimately reach their full potential and achieve their sporting goals (Gonzalez, Connole, Mugford & Taylor, 2018). This approach ensures that athletes receive evidence-based support tailored to their individual needs, maximizing the effectiveness of psychological interventions and facilitating optimal performance outcomes.

Ultimately, the overarching aim of psychological preparation in sport is to empower athletes to perform at their peak consistently, irrespective of external pressures or challenges. By leveraging the principles of sports psychology, athletes can unlock their full potential, transcend limitations, and achieve their loftiest sports aspirations.

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4. Motivation Climate

The construct of motivational climate is based on the achievement goal theory (Ames, 1992) and is the social situation created by the coach and/or the athletes with regard to achievement/goal orientations (Duda & Balaguer, 2007). These goal orientations can be divided into two different factors: a mastery climate (also task-oriented motivational climate), and/or an ego-oriented motivational climate. Within a mastery climate, the task to be performed is the goal for the athletes, so the focus is on exerting effort and improving personally in a specific task.

Athletes in a mastery/task-oriented climate are focused on what they are doing and primarily think about how to accomplish the task. As a result, they feel competent and successful. According to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2002), athletes have three main purposes:

- Gain skill or knowledge
- Exhibit effort
- Perform at one's best

High values of an ego climate would indicate that the focus is mostly on demonstrating superior performance compared to other athletes (Duda & Balaguer, 2007).

Creating a mastery climate within a group has positive effects on performance (Balaguer, Duda, Atienza, & Mayo, 2002)

4.1. Mastery/Task-oriented Motivational Climate

A task-oriented motivational climate is characterized by the athlete's perception that the coach reinforces:

- High effort
- Cooperation among team members
- Learning and improvement
- Perception that everyone on the team contributes to the team's achievements, regardless of ability level.

Coaches who are autonomy supportive:

- Solicit their athletes' input
- Offer meaningful choices for the athletes' performance
- Provide a rationale for their requests
- Downplay the presence of or potential motivating impact of extrinsic rewards.

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Socially supportive coaches:

- Are there to help when needed
- Indicate they care and respect their athletes (even if they are not performing well!)
- Show that they care about their athletes as people rather than only as sport performers.

4.2. On the other hand, ego-oriented Motivational Climate:

An ego-involving motivational climate is characterized by the athlete's perception that the coach:

- Punishes their mistakes
- Fosters rivalry among team members
- Gives much attention to the most talented athletes on the team.

Highly controlling coaches:

- Tend to intimidate their athletes
- Run their team in an autocratic fashion
- Use extrinsic rewards to control the behaviour of the players on their team.

Self-Determination Theory distinguishes between behaviours that individuals perform freely or autonomously and those that they pursue for more or less extrinsic or controlled reasons. This theory identifies various regulations of motivation:

1. External Regulation: Athletes perform behaviour to satisfy an external demand or external rewards.
2. Introjected Regulation: Athletes participate because they feel forced to play the sport.

4.3. Practical applications

To support athlete's basic needs:

Autonomy:

- Link behaviours with valued outcomes
- Accept the person's thoughts and feelings
- Provide opportunities for athletes to take initiative
- Use noncontrolling language.

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Competence:

- Use clear and understandable instructions and expectations
- Give tasks that are optimally challenging
- Use feedback that is focused on improvement
- Provide positive feedback focused on building competence.

Relatedness:

- Develop high-quality interpersonal relationships in and with the team
- Dedicate your time and energy to the athletes
- Show unconditional positive regard
- Show empathy and interest
- Be authentic in your actions and behaviours.

5. Coach-Athlete Relationship

In fostering a coach-athlete relationship, employing the **positive sandwich feedback technique** can be highly effective. A feedback sandwich is a method of feedback where positive feedback serves as a cushion to negative feedback. Generally, the coach firstly delivers positive feedback. Then, he/she delivers critical or constructive feedback and closes with positive feedback. This method combines instruction, encouragement, and reinforcement in a single communication, creating a constructive feedback loop that motivates athletes while addressing areas for improvement.

Here's how it works:

1. Start by acknowledging something the athlete did right. For example, "You did a great job with approaching thee first 3 hurdles."
2. Next, mention something the athlete needs to improve or correct, providing clear directions on how to do so. Emphasize the positive outcomes that will result from making the correction. For instance, "Now, if you can improve the rhythm for all the hurdles, it will improve your time "
3. End with an encouraging statement to reinforce the athlete's efforts. For example, "Keep working on this, and you're going to be a great athlete."

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It's essential to give reinforcements to effort, not just the result, especially in the early stages of learning. Reinforce desired behaviours as soon as they occur and pair reinforcements with information about what was done right. Additionally, if needed reinforce following the rules and provide feedback about the behaviour rather than labelling the person.

- **Practical advice for reacting to mistakes**

Mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning. When an athlete makes a mistake, ask them what they could do instead. If they know how to correct the mistake, provide encouragement. If they're unsure, demonstrate and discuss the correction. Utilize the positive sandwich approach and only criticize what is under the athlete's control.

- **Optimal leadership behaviours**

Lead by example, exhibiting composure, ethical decision-making, and alignment between values and actions. Establish and uphold non-negotiable standards of operation, and actively monitor your technical instruction, encouragement, and praise to athletes.

- **Provide a roadmap for success**

Motivate athletes by painting a compelling vision of what is possible. Engage them in discussions about team culture, set tangible goals, and specify action steps to achieve them. Employ imagery exercises to visualize success.

- **Connect authentically**

Build genuine rapport with athletes by demonstrating care beyond athletics, discussing core beliefs and values, and actively listening to their perspectives.

- **Empower athletes**

Help athletes develop skills and confidence by setting realistic goals, soliciting feedback, and providing leadership responsibilities.

- **Cultivate positive behaviour**

Reinforce desirable behaviours and provide constructive feedback, employing relaxation techniques to help athletes manage anxiety effectively.

6. How to Mentally Prepare Athletes for Competition

6.1 Pre-Competition Phase

The goal of the pre-competition phase is to ensure athletes consistently enter the competition at the highest level of readiness, both psychologically and physically. Pre-competition strategies should be adapted to each athlete, trained in advance, created in advance, and flexible. Each

part of the pre-competition plan should have a clear purpose in preparing athletes for competition.

Techniques utilized in the pre-competition phase include relaxation, breathing techniques, visualization, psychological and physical warm-up, self-talk, and planning related to sleep, meals, and travel schedules. It's essential to break down the pre-competition phase into specific parts, such as waking up, time until arrival at the venue, time from arrival to warm-up, warm-up routines, preparation for the first race, and activities between races.

Challenges in Making Pre-Competition Plans

It's not easy to make pre-competition plans due to several factors:

- Athletes' understanding of what they need to concentrate on and potential distractions
- Awareness of optimal arousal levels and techniques to manage arousal
- Knowledge of optimal emotional profiles for competition and strategies to manage emotions
- Ability to recognize and manage negative thoughts
- Proficiency in breathing techniques and visualization, and training in these skills
- Knowing how to bring themselves to the present moment.

Role of the Coach Before the Competition

Coaches play a crucial role in preparing athletes for competition. They should avoid introducing new information and focus only on activities that help athletes prepare for the competition. As the competition approaches, athletes' ability to follow instructions decreases, so coaches should minimize motivational speeches and excessive talking. Instead, they should tailor their approach to meet the individual needs of each athlete.

Managing Pre-Competition Anxiety

If athletes experience anxiety before competition, coaches can normalize symptoms, encourage deep abdominal breathing, help athletes focus on the task at hand, and provide encouraging self-talk.

6.2 During the Competition

During the competition, athletes should focus on thoughts and behaviours planned in advance. They should concentrate on tasks within their control and stay focused on the present moment. Routines should be established for handling mistakes, and athletes should avoid dwelling on past performances. (*See Annex 2 to this methodology*)

6.3 After the Competition

After the competition, athletes should engage in a thorough analysis of their performance, identifying strengths, areas for improvement, and strategies for future competitions. They should reflect on what went well, what could have been better, and how they can continue to grow and develop as athletes.

In summary, mental preparation for competition requires careful planning, tailored strategies, and effective support from coaches. By implementing pre-competition techniques and strategies, athletes can enhance their performance and achieve their goals in competition.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the methodology outlined for coaches to design and implement sports psychology tools and methods in athlete preparation represents a significant step towards enhancing performance outcomes in sports. By providing coaches with a structured framework rooted in clear theoretical foundations and scientific evidence, this methodology equips them with the necessary tools to optimize athletes' mental skills.

Through the systematic integration of psychological techniques such as goal setting, visualization, and stress management, coaches can empower athletes to perform at their best consistently. This approach not only fosters resilience and mental toughness but also cultivates a positive mindset and confidence essential for success in competitive environments.

Furthermore, by incorporating ongoing evaluation and refinement processes, coaches can ensure that the implemented strategies remain dynamic and responsive to athletes' evolving needs and performance goals. Ultimately, the utilization of this methodology has the potential to unlock athletes' full potential, enabling them to achieve peak performance levels and excel in their respective sports endeavours.



Annex 1

Assessment: Let's create your own psychological profile of an athlete in your track and field club/team!

Objective: In this assessment, a psychological profile of an athlete in your track and field team should be constructed by identifying and ranking ten key qualities essential for success in the sport. Each quality should be defined, rated for importance on a scale from 1 to 10.

Instructions:

Choose 10 key qualities (*from the examples in the table below*)

- Rank them from 1. to 10.
- Definition (your own) of each one
- How important it is from **1 (not at all) to 10 (extremally)**
- Rate the athlete on each of this quality (**1- not at all; 10-completely describes the athlete**)

Psychological characteristics of successful athlete in track and field		
Characteristics	Importance 1 (not at all) to 10 (extremally)	Rating (1- not at all; 10- completely describes the athlete)
respect		
discipline		
consistency		
will power		
self-motivation		
self-awareness		
self-control		
clear competition plan		
focused on the present situation		
mentally tough		
optimistic		
confidence		
assertive		



Psychological characteristics of successful athlete in track and field		
Characteristics	Importance 1 (not at all) to 10 (extremally)	Rating (1- not at all; 10- completely describes the athlete)
Competitive		
able to manage their anxiety levels		
competent		
intrinsically motivated		
quick reflexes		
attention control		
focus		
concentration		
resilience		
arousal regulation		
emotion regulation		
communication		
positive attitude		
clearly defined goals		
good coping skills		
ability to rebound from mistakes		
self-talk		
courage		
leadership skills		
stress management		
determination		

Once you have assessed your athlete, provide him/her with the same tool and make them do the assessment for themselves. Compare the results from your assessment and theirs. The areas where you find discrepancies in the scores/rankings of the psychological characteristics are the ones to work on with the athlete. For example, if you have given the rate of 5 to “confidence” and the athlete assessed it with 10, you can discuss and clarify why you consider this characteristic of an importance (based on the definition of your own) and why you have ranked it with that score.

Annex 2 Support of the athletes during competition – the COPE model

The Annex provides basic guidelines for the coaches to ensure support to the athletes during competitions.

The COPE model represents the athlete abilities to control emotions, to ignore distract/useless information that might compromise his/her performance and based on that to quickly shift their behavior and take decision in compliance with their main goal – to perform at their best. And ultimately to execute their best qualities achieved through physical training.

In summary the COPE Model involves:

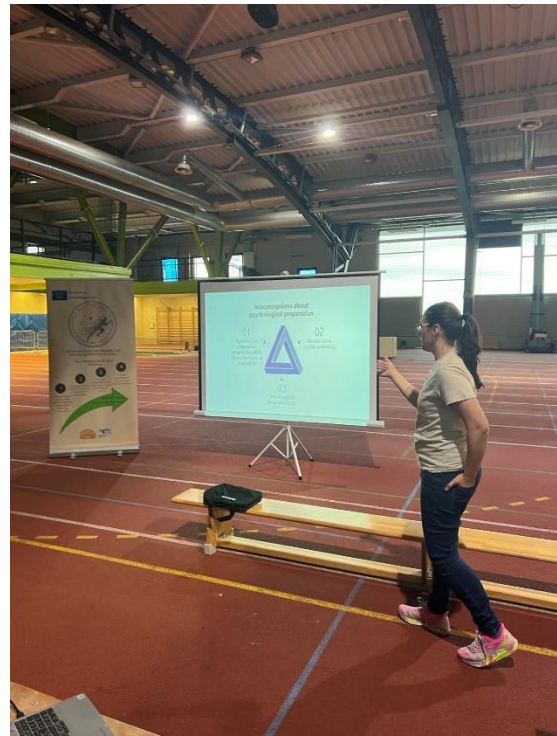
- Emotion Control: Maintain an upright/winner posture, use slow breathing, and encouraging self-talk.
- Input Organization: Separate useful from useless information.
- Planning: Quickly decide how to proceed with clear goals.
- Execution: Trust your body and training.

The role of the coach during competition is limited to the ability to recognize unfavorable patterns related to the above-mentioned areas and to be able to remind the athlete of possible techniques that might provide optimal performance.

Those techniques are part of the “Methodology for the athletes for effective self-preparation programmes for mental training as part of the sports program” which we strongly encourage the coaches to get familiar with.

Annex 3

Demo of the Training on effective mental training program with coaches





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