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TWO APPROACHES TO FEAR OF FAILURE AND SUCCESS

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Abstract

Fear of failure and success are two elements that can easily sabotage top performance. Nowadays, the sensitive elements regarding mental preparation begin to be more and more important. The pressure associated with being on top, the pressure of results and the pressure of life have determined the growth of anxiety in athletes and therefore its influence on developing fears (mainly the fear of failure and success). The sports psychology perspective concerning this issue is based on the toxic expectation cycle and the urgency created by the result-centred objectives (not the progress-related ones). The complementary perspective, inspired by the art of acting, shapes on rejecting whatever is coming, negating whatever is given and blocking the individuals' potential. Taking into consideration these two approaches, the present paper aims to build a detailed picture on the inner perspective of the athletes on this matter, the external perception regarding the attitude and the results of the athlete (the coach, the federation) and the set of methods useful for dealing with fear of failure and success. The paper concludes with a set of recommendations for both athletes and coaches, so that they can maintain a highly functional mental state in situations of crisis and conflict.

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1. Introduction

Anxiety in sports performance is not always a debilitating factor, though it is perceived as an enemy both by coaches and athletes. Most of the time, anxiety facilitates being solution-oriented and gathering all the resources to cope with the stressful situation. Athletes and coaches with facilitative confidence are sure that they can control themselves and can deal with anything that might come, that might occur and that they still can accomplish their goals (Jones & Hanton, 2001). Anxiety is debilitating or facilitative only by perception. There is no wrong or right anxiety. It is just about how we interpret it. In general, anxiety is a typical reaction to novelty perceived as danger and has the role to engage the organism for fighting.

There are two zones of mental functioning in the activity of the athletes: the learning zone and the expressivity/creativity zone. Into the learning zone, cognitive support is essential, because the mind and the body must be aware of the sensations, perceptions and representations, and they have to assimilate, correct, adapt and adjust. The ego is in contact with reality, the superego decides, criticises, norms, limits and perfects. Into the creativity zone, the id can express, can activate all the instincts and drives with the help of the ego, which makes the adjustments to match reality. The learning zone is the time and space associated with sports training and sport preparation (general and specific sports training, pre-competition stage and post-competition stage), and the creativity zone appears mostly in competitions. Into the creativity zone, cognitive interference “is disruptive” (Galluci, 2014, p. 249) to the execution. An athlete who is not in contact with his/her instinct anymore is an athlete who overthinks and begins to fear competition. Therefore, in the creativity zone, cognitive interference “can occupy the space in working memory that is not required to execute the automatic skills” (Mullen, Hardy, & Tattersall, 2005). In this context, cognitive interference may affect the ability of the athletes to adapt and respond to the “here and now” stimuli and to perform in the competition.

Table 01. Stratification of anxiety in sports performance (inspired by Fenichel, 2005)

| | Anxiety | Guilt feeling (specific anxiety) |
|--|---|---|
| (1) Trauma Trauma appears related to a failure in significant competitions, to injury or to essential results that could not be repeated. In cases of trauma, it is not necessary for the athlete to experiment the traumatic event he/she has just assisted to. <i>About past experiences. They might be associated with panic attacks the night before competition, caused by embarrassment or guilt feelings.</i> | Anxiety has an automatic character and is unspecific. | Feeling of annihilation caused by lack of affection or the perception of losing that affection (reality vs. mental, personal truth). It appears the fear of failure or success. Resilient athletes might find trauma facilitative, as a resource for growth and fight. |
| (2) Danger New competitions; the greater the importance of the competition, the higher the threat perceived. <i>About the present moment to face</i> | Anxiety in the service of the ego (self-achievement need) created by anticipation, controlled and used as a warning signal The usual anxiety in sport, drive for arousal and functioning beyond limits – proper for high performance | “Annihilation” in the service of the ego, affect created by anticipation, controlled and used as warning signal (a) Before establishment of the superego, anxiety over loss of narcissistic supplies. It is the case of the athletes who have a gentle superego. (b) After establishment of the superego, conscience (Regulating inner narcissistic supplies) |
| (3) Panic or regarding sports “choking” <i>About future, perspective after the competition</i> <i>The feeling of being paralysed, frozen and hopeless in the mind and body of the athletes</i> | Ego control fails, affect becomes overwhelming. It appears the will and need for regression, to getting to a previous state. | Ego control fails, affect becomes overwhelming. It appears the fear of failure or success. |

Perceiving the importance of the result or competition is a determinant factor for anxiety and depends on the manner in which the athlete integrated previous experience both in sports and non-sports situations. The perceived risks in this situation are associated with the failure to achieve the goal and the perception of the expectations of the coaches, siblings, friends, federation and other authorities. Also, thus, identifying competitive anxiety predictors can be done by analysing stress-generating sources in the context of practiced sport, considering the sense of reality of each athlete. “The working principle of the ego consists in a retardation of automatic id which provides the possibility of using these functions purposefully and in an organized way” (Fenichel, 2005, p. 42). In the same way, the primary anxiety is reduced to an anxiety signal, so does the ego in the process of thinking tame two archaic automatic reactions: the drive to discharge tension, which is slowed down and the tendency of hallucinatory wish of fulfilment which is reduced to imagining the prospective sequencing of events or results.

Although in high performance it is necessary a severe superego to develop an optimum perfectionism and hypercriticism useful to going beyond own limits, the “magic” and the freedom of the instincts are essential. In this sense, Perls (1971) states that “The top players will tell you that when they begin to think, they begin to lose” (p. 24), because, in the process of trying to repair or recall a previous action, an athlete might not be focused on the immediacy of the moment. Fear of failure and success associates with the tendency of ruminating during competition, with indecision, inefficiency and inconsistency. The anxiety and guilt feelings shaping the fear of failure and success tighten the muscles, diminish focus and fill the mind with noise.

Fear of failure or success is a common phenomenon in sports and nurtures from anxiety and expectations. Starting from the age of 7 years, when a child participates in the first competitions without the coach’s support to explain, signify and re-signify anxiety, results and performance, fears become part of the performance. Fear of mistakes, fear of disappointing the others or themselves, fear of novelty, fear of being exposed, fear of humiliation, fear of being embarrassed, fear of the future/ of what will come next, all these win, step by step, their space into the mental of the athlete, perturbing performance.

The toxic expectation cycle represents the social pressure (parents, siblings, coach, sports club, federation) including expectations regarding results and performance contribute to losing control over their emotional states and causing damage in expressing or putting into the act the motor, technical, tactical and mental skills previously acquired. Also, this chain of expectations creates a feeling of urgency with enables difficulties regarding staying into the present – meaning “here and now”. Sports performance is about “here and now,” about activating all the physical and psychological resources for facing the situation of novelty – the competition. The past experiences are useful for the learning state, but they must remain into the past. Projecting oneself into the future, even the phenomenon of the anticipation determines concentration laps which can make the difference between losing and winning. The concept of anticipatory anxiety and the expectation chain are the key factors in explaining fear of failure and success.

2. Problem Statement

1. Critical points are usually missed because they are invested with overwhelming importance (Gologor, 1979, p. 32). An athlete that is prone to losing fears errors, because he fears that his power will

not be at all evident in the eyes of the audience and opponent. He fears annihilation. An athlete who will win does not have that fear because his status and skills are evident to himself. He lives the present moment.

2. Fear of failure and success is an element of great importance in the career of athletes as it determines procrastination in performance. The athletes that experience anticipatory anxiety have stopped to trust their instincts and have great difficulties in accessing intuition.

3. Fear of failure and success in athletes can be either social or neurotic. According to Boardman (1982), neurotic fear of failure and success is associated with achievement motivation and inner conflicts related to achievements. Social fear of failure and success is related to the chain of expectations, with the urgency of objectives (Grand & Goldberg, 2011), the status and gear of being watched.

4. If training is about learning, about being conscious, competition is about flow, having a clear mind and trusting own instincts.

5. Mental training is a component of the athletic preparation program, and it has the same principles and rules. Psychological assistance in sports has its own periodisation by the periodisation of the athletic preparation. To achieve excellence in competition, it is necessary, in the pre-competition phase of training, to do work in the direction of diminishing the impact of fears.

6. The elite athlete is in a functional imbalance from a psycho-physiological point of view as excellence involves going beyond limits. The ability to efficiently cope with stressors and anxiety and regulate arousal under pressure is a critical component of excellence

3. Research Questions

The primary research questions posed in this study is whether there are key elements of fear of failure and success that can be approached using the Improvisational Theatre techniques.

The secondary research question is whether it is possible to transfer coping techniques from the art of the actors into sports training program, mainly in the sports psychology assistance dimension.

4. Purpose of the Study

The present paper aims to explore the relationship between sports psychology and the art of acting, between the athlete and the actor, and shape a clear perspective on the reality of the fear of failure and success. This paper also aims to identify proper strategies for diminishing the fears of athletes by highlighting the similarities between the needs, obstacles and pressure situations encountered by both athletes and actors.

5. Research Methods

Basing our research on the existing theory and our observations and aiming to create a link between the two perspectives (sports psychology and the art of acting) on the fear of failure and success, we considered it appropriate to perform a qualitative approach. The present paper focuses on exploring fear of failure and success, knowledge being produced by studying and understanding, theories, facts and observations. Therefore, this paper is a rather interpretative and constructive (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014) approach to research.

6. Findings

In his work *An actor prepares*, Stanislavski reminds of the state of mood, different from the normal state of mind, but which for the actor is desirable to exist as long as he/she is on stage: “the stage mood ... contains the feeling of loneliness in front of the public, which we do not know in real life (...) spectators cannot only discourage and scare the actor but also stimulate in him an authentic creative energy (...) creating in front of the audience is putting in danger the artist, on one hand, and on the other hand, helps him” (Stanislavski, 1955, p. 312). According to Stanislavski, this state is the right one on the stage, and it is a state the actor learns to play, inducing, practicing, discovering and being able to submit his body, voice, breath, mind, emotional memory. More recently, after Stanislavski explored and explained ways of removing crispness and rediscovering the natural component, the theories and methods of the Improvisational Theatre came into being in support of actors, in which attention is always concentrated outside the individual, on being “here and now”, and any projection related to one's person, as well as self-excitement and scenarios, do not have a place.

Everything that an actor feels regarding emotions and fear is proper to the athlete too.

6.1. Fear of failure

Fear of failure was firstly stated by Rene Laforgue in *Psychopathologie de l'échec*, in 1941, as the characteristic of an individual to feel guilty about his desires and needs, to feel undeserving of success, almost or actually sabotaging his accomplishments. Fear of failure involves an over-extension of the superego in suppressing the ego, resulting in an individual ruining his chances of achieving success or preventing this achievement by injury, procrastination.

The hardest thing is that failure does not matter. It does not have to be exceptional every time because it cannot be. What happens is what the athlete created, and it is what he has to work with (Frost & Yarrow, 2016). Actors never perform same way twice, as in sports performance cannot be replicated.

6.2. Fear of success

For Laughlin (Antonelli, 1974), success inhibitions are defined as follows: “These are complex psychic situations for which success is considered not only an undeserved prize”, but also “a symbol of sin”. This type of athlete has a higher frequency of injuries. The conflict that victory brings with it losses and separation comes from childhood when the child is told to stand by her mother, never to leave her. Separating from the mother bears responsibility and higher vigilance and expectations though in the context of the victory of autonomy. Thus, as the individual begins to win and succeed and the performance level and competitive level is growing, the feeling of shame being seen by many unknown people appears in an emotionally unsafe environment. Laughlin defines Fear as Success Syndrome thus: “It is a strong feeling of insecurity that unconsciously fears responsibility for success” (Antonelli, 1974, p. 197). The successful fear syndrome is present especially in the case of athletes who have started a sports career trying to satisfy a hobby or trying to escape the responsibilities associated with the school. Athletes tend to fail and most often have rigid family education, which leads to dominance, in the sense of rejecting authority. It also presents intense feelings of guilt, impinging on failure and self-denial.

6.3. Coping with fear of failure and success

The primary determinants of performance from a psychological point of view are: (1) the ability to deal with being chased (rather than doing chasing) and to respond to this pressure by raising own performance (MacNamara, Button, & Collins, 2010); (2) the ability to accept that the world-beating performances cannot be produced during every competition; (3) recognition that continuing to excel at the top requires the willingness to move out of the comfort zone and embrace challenges.

Mental preparation is part of the athletic preparation program, and it has its own objectives to be achieved. Mostly in the pre-competition phase of training, the primary purposes of the sports psychological assistance focus on: (1) Creating a positive attitude where the individual focuses his attention on how to achieve the performance goal. (2) Avoiding over-training before the competition. (3) Reducing tensions, worries, fears about what others think. (4). Emotional discharge and increased vital force.

The first thing that Johnstone (1981), the creator of TheatreSports, states as being useful for achieving excellence is to be average. Johnstone says that trying to do the best is the most dangerous fact for an actor, his/her mind being invaded by this intention, trying to ruminate, think, premeditate. Also, Johnstone draws attention: “Be average!”, in the sense of “Do not try to do, do!”.

To overcome fear, Johnstone suggests starting by fearing. It is a healthy state to be afraid. Everybody is worried when they are looked at because there is a chance to lose status in front of people’s eyes. For the actor, the training method of Johnstone means freedom from fear and cognitive distortions, overcoming fear, having initiative, assuming responsibility and increasing the ability of acting/reacting spontaneously and with confidence. The technique that Johnstone uses with actors to overcome fear is by teaching them how to be happy when they fail and keep a positive and beneficial attitude. Such an approach facilitates being solution-orientated. The other technique is: “Do not think and act as you know. You do not know anything”, for keeping the focus on the “here and now” to be vigilant in the present.

Spolin (2008), one of the parents of Improvisational Theatre, referring to the actor’s fear of failure and success believes that the most important thing an actor has to discover is accessing the intuition, the direct knowledge of a situation, without the conscious involvement of reason. It is another way of cognition than the intellectual one. The purpose of exercises and improvisational games in actor’s training is to trigger intuition. One of the principles of Viola Spolin is: “Along with intuitive knowledge comes the certainty”. Having certainties means not being afraid. The sense of self is intuitive, the understanding of the relationship is intuitive, and when the two meet, certainty comes.

The essential exercises in training an Improvisational Theatre actor are focus exercises that develop the “state of flow” and exposure exercises. Focus exercises, in the sense of our paper, have the role of diminishing the severity of the superego and the moral constraints by accessing instincts, and exposure exercises, to make friends with self and the audience.

The prospect that athletes must reach a state of psychological availability that will allow them to cope with pressure and fear, behave and compete successfully although subjected to pressure, to the expectations of others and our own projections, suggests that the following directions of psychological assistance are also relevant, this time referring to the mental training of athletes: (1) maintaining functional health through self-acceptance and reactivation of the primal instincts dominated by pleasure; (2) facilitating the understanding of the causes of personal deficiencies and difficulties through non-specific techniques associated with the Improvisational Theatre. When exposure occurs in non-specific areas,

information is more accessible to digest and transfer; (3) diminishing the discrepancies: mental reality - objective reality; anchoring in the present, focusing on solutions, not on the problem; (4) diminishing anguish, maintaining functional balance in the psychological dynamics by “confronting” one’s own emotions; to be able to cope with something, one must first know it and not be afraid of it; (5) using supportive and protective internal factors to fulfil wishes, stimulate confidence in oneself (and in the spontaneity and ability to flow in performance); (6) meeting the needs of accepting, dominating and provoking, and thus aiming to achieve one’s ideal and wellbeing, meaning a state of maximum functionality, not comfort.

Improvisational Theatre puts you in a position to experience, to understand organically (not just to hear/learn/get to know) that the mistake is possible and probable and that it is excusable (and is often a significant lack of attention or persistence). In improvisation, the error is explicable, it is okay to make mistakes if you learn something from this experience, and fear is also healthy and is a trampoline to courage (without fear, there would not be courage), it is not something to be ashamed of. The feeling underlying emotional blockage is fear in all its forms. As a rule, anxiety is manifested in three variants. It makes you run, abandon, quit, avoid or hesitate. It can block you, paralyse you, being mentally suffocated by instructions, thoughts and emotions, by savage adrenaline, which diminishes lucidity. The third variant is that anxiety makes you fight in the battle, go beyond limits, overcompensating for it. But in the Improvisational Theatre, although fear can be present and usually is before the show begins, actors learn by training to manage it and overcome it quickly. In improvisation, you have the opportunity to experience various emotions and learn more about yourself and about these emotions, as well as to learn to overcome fear faster, not to delay decision-making, to quickly solve and overcome failures and misses and to cultivate your joy. Improvisation is a rediscovery and exercise of freedom and a kind of courage training.

In this sense, we believe that the introduction of Improvisational Theatre techniques in the athletic training can bring added value to their performance by reaching personal knowledge and development, reducing the fear of success and failure and achieving a state of maximum functionality, in a functional imbalance, of high performance. Also, the athlete has the chance to interrupt automatism, routine, monotony and the saturation state. We do not overlook the immediate effects of the Improvisational Theatre training, which are synonymous with the consequences of laughter on the mental state. The practice of this type calls for a relaxed atmosphere and, even if the psychological demand is intense, laughter occurs as a consequence of the game underestimated by its playing valence. Improvisation can also have a decompensation role on the athlete, starting from two premises: the athlete is in a psycho-physiological functional imbalance, as high performance means a permanent overrun of the limits. Improvisation comes where sport and the socio-human environment can no longer compensate. Improvisation adds to something already used and produces a new imbalance that makes the athlete return to essential, primary, instinctive functions. This further imbalance will eventually lead to reconciliation and it will mean reorganization and leap, on the informational level. The athlete trained by improvisation techniques reverts spontaneously, instinctively and rediscovers pleasure. Improvisation “works” on the athlete in the same areas as sports psychology (flow, concentration, maintaining attention, “here and now”), but the athlete is overstated, and this kind of training comes as a relaxed alternative. Another level of decompensation involves the widening of the cultural and emotional horizons.

7. Conclusion

Fear of failure and success has two main components: one neurotic, the other one, social. The Improvisational Theatre techniques may diminish their influence in sports performance as follows:

- The neurotic fear of failure and success generated by the mental conflicts between the superego and the self creates a debilitating adaptation to reality, which can be diminished by the techniques centred on intuitive knowledge, on developing the focus point, thus facilitating the perception of premeditation and anticipation. In this sense, we consider the findings of Spolin (2008, p. 29) to be the key factors to this conclusion: focusing on a “problem to solve”, on the task at hand, on the “here and now” protects the individual from the superego and facilitates the freedom of self. Focus exercises specific to Improvisational Theatre make the scenic action possible and frees the stage from scenarios, fears, choking and drama. Exactly what we need for sports performance, namely to overcome fear of failure or success. These theatrical exercises are not about passing from logic intelligence to intuition, because strategic intelligence is essential in sports. They develop a state of functional mental imbalance which clears the mind of the past and trauma. Accessing intuition, instincts and the self, the past relaxes its grip, letting the mind to be lucid and clear to overcome the distraction of attention induced by the intellect. In this manner, fear blurs and a form of “thinking in action” appears, which acts as a trampoline to the intuitive (Spolin, 2008, p. 27). The “here and now” attitude prevents the athlete from projecting into the future, taking each task as it is, getting lost into it, putting his/her mind entirely into the activity.

- As regards social fear of success and failure, the perspective of Keith Johnstone is essential to overcome them. He states, in an interview, that everybody fears when entering a stage, in our case, when competing. People are afraid when they are looked at, fearing that they would lose status in front of the audience, a perspective similar to that of Gologor (1979) when talking about sports psychology. In this sense, fighting the fear is not an efficient method. For overcoming fear, the key is to start with fear. In this sense, it is important for the athlete to be happy when he/she fails during the training sessions, because this is an opportunity to learn, and if he/she is happy, the resources will activate towards progress and development. Also inspired by Johnstone, it is important for the athlete to learn to act like he/she does not know and to have an attitude of modesty, a fact also identified by Gherghisan (2016). Modesty provides the opportunity to be present. For diminishing social fear of success and failure, exposure exercises for the Improvisation Theatre may be essential, in the context of psychological assistance in sports.

The present paper has focused on more humanistic sports psychology, which can assimilate non-specific techniques as means for reactivating the trust in intuition for tempering the superego and accepting the needs, desires and drives as one’s own, without guilt and shame. The rebirth or reactivation of the inner child is much more accessible in a non-specific environment, with non-specific tasks in the form of games and play, facts which help the athlete develop, getting lost in the pleasure of playing, an authentic self. All these can be accomplished, as we have assumed, by integrating the focus and exposure techniques specific to Improvisational Theatre into the psychological preparation program, and by presenting them as means for emotional discharge and fun, but with latent objectives of diminishing or solving the conflict between superego and self.

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