

The inverted-U relationship: Arousal - Performance

Emotional Arousal leads to excitement, activation, apprehension and nervousness.

There is a relation between the performance of a player and the level of arousal. A player can be under- and over aroused. In the built up to a game we need to get everybody at optimum arousal in order to get peak performance. This inverted-U relation (the shape of the graph) between performance and arousal is shown here.

Inverted-U: Key factors

The key factors in arousal management are:

- Best performance results from optimum arousal states 'flow'.
- For each type of rugby skill there is a slightly different optimum level of arousal (e.g. think of goal kicking, scrummaging, throw in the line-out, running to score a try).
- Individual rugby players have their own slightly different optimum levels of arousal.
- Players at different levels of skill ability have different levels of optimum arousal (beginner / experienced).
- The requirement is to match the optimum levels of arousal to the individual and the skill.

A player should strive to get at optimum arousal level and should learn to control this. This is not so difficult. I discuss these things with my players making them aware of the curve and how they can control their arousal level.

What happens when players become over-aroused (psyched-out)

The attention of the player shifts:

- his vision narrows (tunnel vision)
- Worry about worrying.

Muscle tightness:

- Loss of coordination and timing
- "Paralysis by Analysis"

Everybody has different body signs.

What causes increased arousal states?

Factors causing players to become uptight

- Importance placed on results rather than performance.
- Too many things to think about in performance.

www.rugbycoach.com

- Uncertainty about the result.

Player situation model of motivation

The role of the coach

First get to know your players as individuals:

- Their individual level of optimum arousal
- Not every player needs an emotional pep talk
- Many players need to relax and calm down.

Emphasize on "doing your best":

- Set individual performance outcome goals.

Reduce uncertainty:

- Create a friendly, supportive atmosphere.

Emphasize and instill Positive Mental Attitudes:

- Players should know themselves.
- Focus on "I can".
- Set realistic goals.
- Set personal goals.

Positive mistakes:

- Losing is not a lot of fun but it is "water under the bridge".
- Ask "What can we learn from the loss / mistake".
- Analyse it.
- It is irrational to dwell on it.

Let the players visualize positive images. Again goalsetting is part of this.

The exercises let the players tune into their body signals, rate their arousal level and their performance. Mental rehearsal: let them compare good performance with the built up.

Achieve Self-Control of arousal

Try to follow the same mental preparation procedures, have a routine to mentally warm up before every game. Encourage players to develop and practice a short mental preparation routine in case they are required to play at short notice, e.g. injury replacement. Players should be encouraged to check their mental preparation state while awaiting competition:

- Do they feel under or over-aroused?
- Do they have more "butterflies" than usual?
- Are they worrying more than usual?

When over-aroused players should be encouraged to:

- Use relaxation training to calm themselves.
- Use imagery to "view" good performances.
- Put the game into perspective, asking how important this match is.

When under-aroused players should be encouraged to:

- Analyse why they feel down.
- Psych-up; use imagery to think about how they felt before a really important game.
- If playing a weaker team think about how it would feel to lose.

Key points in controlling optimum arousal:

Players should be encouraged to:

- Develop a number of psychological skills, e.g. relaxation, attention, concentration and imagery.
- Practise these mental preparation skills regularly.
- Never use psychological skills in MAJOR games unless they have been:
 - Practised extensively.
 - Successfully employed in practice.
 - Used in various levels of competition.
- This same mental preparation technique is NOT best for everyone.
- There are different optimum levels of arousal.
- Stress / arousal management takes time and practise, practise and more practise.

Key points about psychological skills

Realistic expectations of psychological skills in rugby

- Mental skills are not a substitute for physical skills they complement each other.

Summary - Psychological skills training for rugby

In this module we have looked at two major areas of mental training in rugby - motivation and competitive stress.

This information forms the foundation of psychological skills training program for rugby.

IRB Newsletter distributed among IRB Member Unions. Written by Ken Hodge, Sports Psychologist, University of Otago.