



by Kostantin Papazov

MOTIVATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPARATION

Konstantin Papazov is the head coach of Lukoil Academic Sofia (Bulgaria) team, winner of 2005 championship. While he was the head coach of Levski Sofia, he also won two Bulgarian Championships and one Cup of Bulgaria. He is the former head coach of the Bulgarian National Men's and Women's National team. He was also owner of Slavia Sofia.

I don't think that I'm the best choice with my seven years coaching experience to give my opinion about motivation. However, the theme about motivation in basketball was the basis for starting my coaching career. The history of that is interesting.

As a player, I wasn't that great and my ambitions to succeed were connected with my desire to be a good coach. I finished my player's career in Bulgaria exactly when democracy and private business took over in my country. That fact gave me the opportunity to earn money in a short period with my business. Then, one of the coaches in Bulgaria came to me and asked for financial help. I didn't know that in the next four years I would be the owner of a team and my ambitions to succeed made the club one of the best in Bulgaria. We were soon champions of the country and winner of the Cup in 1997.

After four years as president of the team, I became a coach when I was 31 years old. I knew that I had a long way to go and one of the things that could help me out in the beginning was motivating my players. I believed that when the players were motivated, they would stay behind me. This is what happened to me. That same year we played in league final and after three years, I became coach of the Men's National team of Bulgaria. Every time I think back to those early years, I remember that one of the most important things in sports is how you will motivate the players, and that was my primary aim.

Even the fastest, strongest and smartest players will underachieve if they concentrate on the wrong things, are unable to quickly let



go off the mistakes, lack self-confidence, or can't handle the pressure of competition. If you leave the mental side of performance to chance, then the players are more vulnerable to performance problems, including excessive nervousness, psych-outs, choking, and slumps. To be more consistent, successful players have to learn the power

of sports psychology. This will help players to think like a winner and develop mental toughness.

As a coach, a working knowledge of sports psychology techniques will help you to become more effective and therefore much more successful with your athletes. Knowing how to get the most out of your

players at "crunch time" and how to avoid the mental traps that far too many coaches fall into provides you the competitive advantage. I always try to train my athletes to use mental toughness skills and they eventual compete to their potential.

Discipline is an absolute necessity. Good planning and organization will provide for a disciplined environment, but the occasion will arise for additional control. I have a clearly defined set of rules for when player behavior deviates from team development. It is very important to explain to your players what distractive behavior is and how that will negatively affects their experience. Players should understand their behavioral responsibility to the team. They should also know and respect that their coaches are in control. It is then the coach's responsibility to the team to exact control.

Most performance problems that athletes and other performers struggle with are not a result of poor physical conditioning or a lack of physical skills or technical ability. Sure, certain physical or mechanical factors can sometimes cause the players to play under their level. However, when the heat of competition is turned up high, team that falls apart most often does so because of mental factors like poor concentration, negativity, lack of confidence, or an inability to let go of mistakes or bad breaks.

If you're a committed coach, then you work too hard and sacrifice too much to let your own competitive performance, or that of your team, be disrupted by mental errors. The mental toughness techniques in sports psychology are just what you need to get your performance or team back on the fast track!

To realize your team's full potential, you have to start training their minds as well as their body! Just as you develop their physical skills and techniques, you must learn how to develop these sports psychology mental skills in your players. What are these so-called mental skills?

- ▼ Learning to stay relaxed under pressure and having the ability to focus on what's important and block out everything else.
- ▼ Being able to quickly rebound from mistakes, bad calls, and failures.
- ▼ Knowing how to handle self-doubts and negative thinking.
- ▼ Knowing how players can self-motivate by setting personally meaningful and compelling goals.
- ▼ Systematically developing confidence and a positive, go-for-it attitude.

As a "head coach" I've helped many basketball players get out of slumps, develop confidence, better handle competitive pressu-

re, and perform to their potential. Coaches and players have to be serious about reaching athletic or performance dreams. Many athletes have tremendous God-given gifts, but they don't focus on the development of those gifts. It's true in sports and it's true everywhere in life. Hard work is making the difference.

It's important to remember that athletes can motivate one another. We usually split the players into drill groups and score them as a team rather than as individuals. These training sessions help build team morale and make the players feel they have invested in one another. Each player has a responsibility to the team. Never allow individuals to take over the effort of the whole team. As the great basketball legend Michael Jordan said: "I have no individual goals. We play for one reason and that's to win the title as team."

Basketball players have to focus, "block out" distractions, rebound from mistakes, and handle pressure right from the beginning of the season. Concentration is the heart of peak performance. It is the foundation of mental toughness. Concentration is the ability to focus in on what is important and block out everything else. Every player concentrates before the game. The issue is on what? If your player chokes or falls apart, then he was concentrating, but on the wrong things. Don't tell your players, "Concentrate!" unless you follow that by exactly what you want them to concentrate on.

I always wanted to help my athletes understand that the main difference between their best and worst performances has to do with their pre-performance self-talk and thoughts. What they think goes into their bodies and reflects on their coordination, reflexes, and speed.

We were ahead of very important game against Switzerland, which served as a qualification for Eurobasket 2003 in Geneva. Right before the game, we found that Ukraine defeated Lithuania in Kiev, and for us there was no alternative, but to win the game against the home team. We were a better team than our opponents were but I knew that it would not be easy to get the victory.

In my pre-game talk to the players in the lockerroom, I reminded them that when they were small kids and played in at the local school ground, they dreamed to play for the Senior National team. Now this dream was reality for them. Their childhood ambitions were to be realized. I asked them when they heard the national anthem played before the game to remember that they were a group of twelve people selected to represent 8 million Bulgarians. After my talk, the players were so motivated that before the match started I knew we had a great advantage over the host team.

In the lockerroom speech before every game, the coach needs to find the most important words to make sure his players will be motivated right from the start of the game.

Peak performance is about trusting and letting the performance happen. The player is not thinking and is on "automatic pilot," utilizing his efforts. Poor performance is about doubting, over-thinking, analyzing, evaluating and trying too hard. Coaches can help avoid bad performance by giving players one or two specific things to focus on for the game. By narrowing concentration, the athlete has more of a chance to slip into an automatic mentality. Players will better handle stress and avoid psych-outs if they can mentally learn to stay totally focused. Negative past thoughts will bring them down and uncontrollable future thoughts of the outcome will do the same.

Winners see what they want to have happen before a game; while losers have a tendency to pay attention to what they are afraid will happen. I found it to be very important to encourage the players to practice seeing the outcome and performance that they want in their minds long before the game is played.

I do not believe that fear motivates athletes. Fear motivation, or punishing players to "motivate" them, is only a temporary solution, if it works at all. After repeated exposure to fear tactics, athletes become immune to threats, and continued punishment may destroy their desire to participate.

Effective motivation flows from the partnership between coaches and athletes. As coaches, we must understand our athletes as individuals and as a team, we must gain their trust and respect. We must remember that we're coaching people, not machines. We must teach the players the mechanics of a sport, but we must also assist in building their character. Showing support and interest in all facets of their lives helps build an effective coach-athlete relationship.

Success is realized the moment an athlete gains a winning attitude, is motivated to set a worthwhile goal, and begins to move toward that goal. A winning attitude is the best motivator. If athletes believe they can achieve their goals, they'll try harder and increase their likelihood of success.

Attitude controls motivation; motivation controls performance; performance controls success.

Motivation and psychological preparation is very important moment in professional sport. Every coach needs to have time to prepare himself in that direction as well. The most difficult part is when we play games with weak teams but in the same time, those matches are the best opportunities for developing the motivation and concentration of the players.