

Motivating Masters

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Motivation is the powerful inner force that drives all of our thoughts, feelings and actions. One of the critical differences between a champion athlete and an also-ran entails how they are able to maintain intensity of effort over time. Elite athletes such as 45-year-old sprinter Merlene Ottey, who competed in her 7th Olympics in Athens 2004, have the propensity to direct their energies extremely effectively. We will be examining how motivation contributes to success for masters athletes and suggest some motivational techniques which you can tailor to your athletes' needs.

The two types of motivation

Two main types of motivation determine athletes' behaviours. Those who are driven by factors external to participation such as prize money, a trophy or to be revered by the fans, will usually gain greater satisfaction from such rewards than they will simply from playing their sport. This is known as *extrinsic motivation*. Some athletes compete well under negative pressure, such as a threat from their coach if they do not perform up to scratch. This is also a common form of extrinsic motivation; it works through notifying the athlete that if they are not willing to give maximal effort, they will lose favour or be dropped from the team. Such negative motivation does not tend to work well with masters athletes and should generally be avoided.

The second type of motivation comes from within and is characterised by interest in and enjoyment derived from sports participation. This is referred to as *intrinsic motivation*. This type of motivation typifies masters athletes. If one of your athletes participates due to their sheer love of the sport or to enhance their skills, they will be motivated primarily by intrinsic factors. Immersion in the process of participation is primarily what intrinsic motivation is all about.

Wanting to compete among the best in their discipline is a common form of motivation among elite masters athletes: prizes or public adulation usually come a distant second. In masters-level competition, the prizes on offer are very small in tangible terms. In fact, international masters athletes often purchase their own kit and cover their own travel expenses! This alone is a strong marker of their relatively high intrinsic motivation.

Research findings

Research conducted at Brunel University suggests that elite adult athletes are characterised by the simultaneous presence of high extrinsic and high intrinsic motivation (Vlachopoulos, Karageorghis, & Terry, 2000). However, it is really

important that extrinsic motives are nurtured on a firm foundation of high intrinsic motivation. When extrinsic motives become too strong, there can be some very negative consequences; for example, burnout, unsportsmanlike behaviour and poor concentration.

Using extrinsic rewards

One of the key aspects in using extrinsic rewards effectively is that they reinforce an athlete's sense of *competence* rather than compel them to perform for a further reward. Psychologists refer to rewards that increase one's sense of competence as being *informational* in nature rather than *controlling*. Informational extrinsic rewards can actually increase intrinsic motivation whereas controlling rewards often diminish it (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

An example of using extrinsic rewards effectively among masters athletes comes from the leading Kent-based athletics coach Junior Field. He has coached numerous top veterans including national, European and world record holders. Field uses a subtle yet simple token reward scheme that entails appointing top-performing athletes (in terms of effort exerted) to lead hill runs or intervals on the track.

This has the dual purpose of reinforcing to the group who's trying the hardest and providing excellent role models for the others to follow. Through this process of public recognition of effort -- the extrinsic reward -- Field ensures that the entire group exerts maximal effort and that recovery periods are not stretched beyond the scheduled time.

Insert photograph of Junior Field about here

Caption: Junior Field: A coach whose motivational techniques go way beyond the carrot-and-stick approach (!)

Credit: Photo courtesy of *Diamond White Productions*

Three motivational strategies for your athletes:

1. Goal setting

You should encourage your athletes to set a few realistic but achievable long-term goals; perhaps to qualify for the 2009 World Masters Games in Sydney. It is particularly important that masters athletes set their own goals: most will have an encyclopaedic knowledge of their sport and a clear sense of what is possible. By empowering your athletes to set their own goals, they are more likely to internalise the goals and pursue them with vigour. To keep athletes on track with their long-term goals, you should also encourage them to set a medium-term goal. For example, a relevant medium-term goal for an athlete aiming to participate at the 2009 World Masters Games in Sydney might be to win their national championships in the preceding year.

To keep your athletes immersed in the here and now, they should use short-term markers such as weekly sub-goals. An example of long- and short-term goal setting comes from the imperturbable American sprinter Justin Gatlin, whose long-term goal is "to be the fastest man in the world over 100 metres", but has a short-term goal of simply "aiming to win each race as it comes".

Given Gatlin's prodigious talent, the goals he pursues are realistic and very achievable. Remember that you should help your athletes to monitor their goals on a regular basis. Following review, changes should be made in

response to changing circumstances. Goals work best when there is a little flexibility in the goal setting process and when their achievement constantly reinforces an athlete's sense of competence. One of the main differences in goal setting between masters athletes and their more junior counterparts is that masters athletes' goals might have more to do with arresting age-related decline than actually making performance gains in the long term. The best masters athletes are those whose fitness and motor skills decline the least as they get older.

2. Inspirational age-congruent music

Music is a great way to get your athletes motivated before competition. If a masters athlete has a certain type of music or a specific song - such as *Queen's* "We Are The Champions" - that gets them energised, it would be advantageous to incorporate that track into their pre-event routine. Your athletes should select age-congruent music -- preferably from their formative years -- to prime themselves for competition. Such music will have a more potent effect than using a recent track, as it will carry stronger personal associations for them (Karageorghis & Terry, 1997). For example, the former "King of Clay" Thomas Muster, now on the senior tennis tour, is known to psych-up to *Katrina and The Waves'* inspirational track "Walking on Sunshine".

3. Positive self-talk

Positive self-talk is a technique that can be used to boost an athlete's motivation in both training and competition. It capitalises upon their powerful inner voice to provide them with a mental edge. With appropriate repetition, self-talk changes athletes' belief systems. Some famous examples of self-talk include Muhammad Ali's "I am the greatest" and Michael Johnson's "I can be good when I'm good and good when I'm bad". Ask your athletes to come up with their own positive self-statements that they can use whenever the going gets tough. Masters athletes are particularly adept in thinking up appropriate self-statements.

Summary

Motivation is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Hopefully, you now have a better understanding of the two main types of motivation and how these interact to impact upon sporting performance. You should aim to integrate some of the motivational strategies described herein and to monitor their effects. As is the case with different training regimens, a little experimentation is often required to find out what works best for an athlete.

We will close with the words of nine-times Wimbledon champion Martina Navratilova who, in trying to articulate to a group of journalists the distinction between involvement in and commitment to sport, artfully explained:

"The difference between involvement and commitment is like the difference between eggs and bacon: a chicken is involved but the pig is committed".

References

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