Motivation and the Gymnast: Theory and Implications for Practice

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Many coaches may have cause to reflect upon a gymnast's level of motivation. Commitment, dedication and intense effort are all attributes associated with a highly motivated gymnast.

Alternatively, a gymnast may appear to lack motivation. In such cases a decrease in effort, a general sense of lethargy, and a lack of enthusiasm may be noted. As motivation is linked to positive and negative behaviour patterns, it is not surprising that coaches are interested in techniques that maintain or enhance motivation. Sport psychology is increasingly recognised as a discipline that might offer such advice; however, the process of recommending motivational techniques to coaches is far from straightforward. Advice needs to be theoretically driven, a procedure complicated by the fact that there are many different theories of motivation. This article examines the contribution of one of these theories, a 'goal-perspective' view of achievement, and offers practical suggestions for how coaches can enhance the motivation of individual gymnasts by integrating 'personal development' strategies into the coaching environment.

Goal-Perspective Theory of Motivation: Background and Applications

Goal-perspective theory has emerged from school-based research undertaken in North America. The paediatric nature of the research has resulted in many practical suggestions being directed at teachers and coaches who practice within physical education and elite youth sports settings. Despite the research being primarily 'child centred' major contributions have encouraged psychologists to extrapolate their findings into other domains. With this in mind, the theoretical concepts and practical implications within goal-perspective theory are presented as reading for gymnastics coaches at all levels.

Goal-Perspective Theory: Core Concepts

Researchers investigating goal-perspective theory have established a number of core propositions. All of these relate to the concept of 'goal-orientation'. Goal-orientation is associated with factors of a dispositional nature and with environmental or situational issues. Dispositional elements shed light on the way an individual evaluates their own performance and rates their attainments. Environmental or situational perspectives link goal-orientation to the 'coaching environment' and examine gymnasts' responses to coaching sessions. More specifically, situational research contrasts the 'motivational impact' of coaching that encourages interpersonal comparison with coaching that stresses personal development.
Goal-Orientation and the Individual

Within goal-perspective theory, each individual is presumed to have their own goal orientation which reflects a tendency to be task-or-ego-oriented. Task-oriented individuals evaluate their own performances, and their own competence levels, by employing self referenced strategies. In contrast, ego-orientated individuals tend to assess outcomes interpersonally by measuring their attainments against those standards achieved by others. In this instance, a gymnast may evaluate their ability by comparing themselves with other gymnasts at the club. The theory is complicated by the fact that people are likely to demonstrate both task and ego oriented tendencies. Therefore, individuals need not be strongly task-or-ego-oriented; they could be high or low in both. Despite this fact, much of the research has examined individuals who are either highly task or highly ego-oriented. This work has identified attitudes and behaviours which are typical of individuals who are highly task-or ego-oriented. A task-orientation is associated with persistence, a tendency to attain optimal performance, a belief in success being linked to effort, and a likelihood that enjoyment and a sense of satisfaction will result from participation in sport. Conversely, ego-orientation is associated with a lack of persistence, the use of unhelpful learning strategies, elevations in anxiety, and a decrease in perceptions of enjoyment and satisfaction.

A review of goal-perspective literature suggests that 'task is best'. Despite the consistency with which research has highlighted the benefits of task involvement, there is little doubt that (in certain circumstances) an ego-orientation is both an appropriate and positive state to be in. For example, a 'high-ego-low-task' gymnast who considers them self to be 'the best' or to be 'very well placed' in the ability rankings at their club, will receive a good deal of positive feedback by comparing his performance against others. An experience like this could create a positive emotional state, a view supported by recent research which links ego orientation and perceived success with intense sensations of self-confidence. This suggests that for an ego-oriented gymnast to benefit from being interpersonally focused, his perceived levels of competence will need to be suitably high. Of course, psychologists have little difficulty in scripting less promising case histories. For instance, ego-oriented experiences will differ considerably if the interpersonal feedback has been negative. Consequently, a gymnast may begin to question their own ability, a process which could eventually undermine self-confidence and contribute to decreasing levels of performance.

Goal-Orientation and the Situation

Situational research has focused attention on what is termed the 'motivational climate'. This work has suggested that situations can also be classified as being 'task' or 'ego' oriented. Findings in many ways mirror the dispositional research and indicate that a task-oriented climate can encourage enhanced learning and a tendency to work hard. Furthermore, research demonstrates that when athletes feel that coaches have created an 'ego' climate (typified by interpersonal competition) then satisfaction and interest decrease. Similar findings have been noted in studies that have examined youth-sports coaching: in this work creating a mastery climate is associated with increased levels of enjoyment.
Integrating Dispositional and Situational Factors

Goal-perspective theory suggests that the way gymnasts view any coaching situation will be determined by a combination of their own goal-orientation and the goal-climate established by the coach. This integration of personal and situational factors lends itself to the notion that gymnasts will be task- or ego involved. Involvement simply refers to the way someone is thinking at any one moment in time. For example, a gymnast who is high in both task- and ego-orientation may be 'ego involved' one moment and 'task-involved' the next. Similarly, a gymnast with a high-task, low ego profile will tend to be task-involved most of the time. Therefore, a gymnast's goal involvement may fluctuate over time. In the same way, a coaching session is likely to have moments which are more dominantly task than ego-oriented and visa-versa. However, of greater significance is the widely held view that coaches can have some influence on the goal-involvement of their gymnasts. Recent research suggests that a high task- or ego-climate can override dispositions tendencies. Furthermore, the paediatric literature (in which enjoyment and satisfaction are major considerations) is united in supporting the implementation of task strategies. Whether gymnastics coaches would consider such issues to be universally important to the more mature gymnast is open to debate. If, however, coaches are keen for gymnasts to focus on personal development and to work hard, and also want gymnasts to 'enjoy' their training sessions, then deploying task strategies to create a task-climate would prove helpful.

Practical Considerations: Does Limiting Ego-Involvement Mean an End to Competitiveness?

A conceptual debate concerning whether ego-involvement and competitiveness are synonymous has existed for some time. Research literature suggests that reducing opportunities for ego-involvement should not be linked automatically to a reduction in competitiveness. Generating an ego-climate requires a coach to stress interpersonal comparisons, for example, telling a gymnast they need to be more like one of their peers. Whilst, interpersonal comparison may, to some degree, be a part of everyday life, it is something that can be emphasised or reduced through coaching practice. For example, pre-season sprint or cross-country times can be presented as first-to-last tables (ego-involving) or published alphabetically (more task-involving). In contrast, competitiveness involves gymnasts trying to overcome the challenge of others and the success or failure of this exercise can be examined in a task-focused way. For example, a coach might ask a gymnast to reflect on competition and ask "what could you have done better". This encourages 'self-referenced' reflection and encourages personal control.

Research in youth sport has also shed light on this issue. High levels of enjoyment have been linked to high-task, high competitive situations. Conversely, highly competitive coaching sessions are thought to be less enjoyable when the task-climate component is low.
Practical Suggestions: Generating a Task-Oriented Coaching Climate

Thus far, the benefits of task-involvement have been highlighted. This section outlines a number of practical steps that coaches can take to help them establish a task-oriented climate.

- Design coaching activities that stress variety, and individual challenge
- Ensure gymnasts are working towards their own realistic short-term goals
- Stress that goal-attainments relate to individual progress-improvement
- Seek out opportunities to recognise and praise individual progress
- Involve gymnasts in self-evaluation and encourage gymnasts to reflect
- Allow gymnasts to establish personal practice targets and schedules
- Involve gymnasts in decision making and encourage discussion

Summary

Goal-perspective literature associates effort, group co-operation and enjoyment with task involvement. It also recognises that an ego orientation can have positive consequences for those gymnasts who are presently experiencing success and perceive their ability to be high. On balance, all gymnasts are expected to benefit in some way from engaging in a degree of task-oriented thinking. By integrating task-strategies into their own practice, coaches can encourage gymnasts to become task-involved and focused on developing facets of their own discipline.

Further Reading