



PERFORMANCE VOLLEYBALL CONDITIONING

A NEWSLETTER DEDICATED TO IMPROVING VOLLEYBALL PLAYERS

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Volleyball Strength and Conditioning Coaches: What To Do When Your Athletes Don't Perform

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In his work with [Athlete Assessments](#) Bo has worked with some of the top Olympic, Paralympic, National, Professional, State, and US College teams. This has included working with over 17,000 individuals in sports organizations, spanning 24 different sports and several countries.

I wrote this article during a client's national team selection, as it reminded me how I felt during my own selection for various national and Olympic teams, and the important connection between training and competition. This article will cover techniques to help athletes' better control their emotions so they can compete at least as well as they train, if not better. I've also included my top three coaching tips for helping athletes manage their emotions during competition.

The time strength and conditioning coaches spend with athletes provides an important opportunity to work on both athletes' physical and non-physical skills.

One of the most frustrating and disappointing aspects of coaching is when athletes' competitive results do not reflect their hard work in training. So why does this happen? What is the major difference between training and competition? How do you ensure that your athletes perform to their full potential during competition?

A key reason is that competition has more 'attached' to it or is perceived to have more attached to it. Competition is the reason athletes train. It is what they have worked towards. For many athletes, competition is the reason they do their sport. At the end of competition there is a result, a measure, and in the minds of athletes, it 'counts'. Most athletes pride and status is linked to their race results or ability to win games.

On the other hand, training, including strength and conditioning sessions, is just seen as 'practice'. There will always be another training session, so it doesn't count. There is not as much at stake. Or is there?

Training is NOT Just Another Practice Session

To create better competition results, coaches can help their athletes improve their performance in two key ways:

- Ensure athletes treat practice and strength and conditioning sessions seriously rather than just seeing it as just another session. During training set technical, physical and mental goals for and with your athletes. This will ensure they are focused on what is going to make them better during training (and in competition).
- Coach your athletes to manage their thinking and mindset for competition. They must first do this in training consistently to be able to do this effectively in competition.

To train effectively athletes need to have an attitude of professionalism. This is not about being overly serious (it can still be an enjoyable and fun session!), it is more about making the session count. Being professional is about having goals to achieve each and every time you hit the gym, field, pitch or court. Each athlete should have a technical, physical and mental goal they are working towards, and each goal must be measurable and specific. Here are some examples.

Technical Goal

A technical goal in spiking might be to focus on the hip or foot placement when striding to make a kill. In the gym you might address the alignment of your hips, knees and ankles during a squat. Coaches can videotape sessions to provide accurate feedback on this or any other technical aspect of performance.

Mental Goal

An example of a mental goal in strength and conditioning training could involve visualizing the correct execution of a particular step of the snatch. The athletes won't do this 100% of the session. You can explain the goal before they start the session, and then intermittently require them to focus on this goal for set periods throughout the session (for example get athletes to begin focusing on the goal six times for a few minutes each time, then build up to a larger proportion of the session).

The basic premise is for athletes to train their mind to narrow their concentration to chosen elements of the techniques within their sport. By becoming better at this, athletes improve their ability to focus on what matters to their performance when it comes time to compete. They also become better at ignoring distractions that do not add to their performance.

Physical Goal

An example of a physical goal would be to complete the training session with heart rates within a certain zone as stipulated by the coach. Or to lift a certain weight for the repetitions set. Once again, you have to implement specific and measurable goals.

For the coach, you should set goals with and for your athletes each session. You could give the whole squad the same goal, or you can set individual goals for each athlete, depending on the situation.

No Wasted Sessions

Treating each training session like it is a limited opportunity to perfect your athletes mental, physical and technical preparation, ensures no sessions are wasted. Each session is a vital element in piecing together a race or game day performance that the team, athletes and coaches can be proud of. The reality is that a lost session cannot be retrieved. The best athletes I know have a very high level of pride in each and every performance, whether it is a practice session or competition. They never let themselves down.

From my own experience at University, I recall what it was like to turn up to an exam knowing I hadn't done enough study. I hadn't made the most of the time opportunity I was granted. It was never a confident feeling. Competition is the same. You want your athletes to turn up to races or games with the belief that they have done everything they can to prepare effectively, that each opportunity was maximized. Self-belief transforms into a sense of entitlement to perform well. Your athletes believe they have put in the preparation, now it is just a matter of repeating what they have done in practice at the competition.

Many athletes believe they have to do something different on competition day to what they do at training. This belief does not help achieve best performance when it matters the most. If athletes are not taking training as seriously as they should they will believe that competition demands a different approach. My recommendation is for coaches to make sure practice is viewed as just as important as competition. Competition is an opportunity for athletes to utilize the tools they've been given in training and perform at their best.

Train your Athletes Thinking and Mindset for Competition

On game or race day, the hard preparation has been done and it is the time for your athletes to perform at their best. The main challenge is to manage their thinking. I am not suggesting this is an easy thing to do but here is a place to start for coaches to help train their athletes' mindsets for competition.

To create a great performance there are certain inputs that must combine. Inputs on competition day largely relate to how your athletes think, feel and behave prior to and during a race or game.

How Your Athletes Think

Thinking is about what your athletes say to themselves. I stressed earlier that your athletes need a mental goal for each and every training session. When your athletes have trained with mental goals in mind all season, it is easier for them to know what they need to say to themselves on competition day. It can also be useful to get your athletes to think about a time in their past when they performed at their very best and recall exactly what they said to themselves and how they felt before and during that competition. Get your athletes to spend some time identifying this so they can try to recreate this perfect mindset. Athletes can also use past disappointing performances by identifying the critical elements of what they said to themselves on those occasions, to ensure that they avoid repeating this.

How Your Athletes Feel

Your athletes' thoughts express their inner beliefs which will either help or hinder their performance. Your athletes should focus on saying and thinking positive and helpful thoughts. What they say to themselves will have an impact on how they feel. On competition day, athletes should consider how they need to feel emotionally. That is, do they need to be fired up, calm, quiet, loud, soft, or composed? It is different for every athletes. Your athletes being aware of how they need to feel in order to be their best is a vital element in performing well at any time.

How Your Athletes Behave

Finally, how are your athletes going to behave on competition day? Hopefully their behaviors will be reflective of their conduct during all those practice sessions. Competition day should be no different. I have seen some athletes behave differently on competition day and subsequently perform poorly due to this loss of behavioral control. Ensure your athletes know how they should behave at competitions. They need to be clear on their pre-race or pre-game routines, what they can and cannot do before, during and after the race or game.

In the end, competing is all about how your athletes train. So training sessions should be conducted like your season results depend on it. Athletes should practice over and over again what they need to say to themselves, how they need to feel and how they need to behave on competition day. This will make racing or their games feel familiar and they will believe in themselves because you have earned a great performance.

A Quick Fix for Competition Day (when you haven't had the benefit of 'training' your emotions)

If you're saying to yourself that this article is all well and good if you were reading it at the beginning of the training season, but now your athletes are about to compete, what can you do? Here are my top 3 recommendations for athletes to compete at their best if they haven't had the advantage of 'training' their nerves during practice. So get your athletes to:

- Put the game or race into perspective. In their life they will face far greater challenges and moments than the one they are about to face in this competition. This is a growth opportunity to prepare them to deal with life's future challenges. This always helped me cope with anxiety. At the end of the day, this is a sporting competition so keep it in perspective.
- Breathe and think composed thoughts. Composure is a wonderful word and a performance state for most people. Get your athletes to breathe deeply in through the nose and slowly release through the mouth. As they release they should feel their heart rates slow slightly. Get your athletes to tell themselves they are in control. Athletes should repeat this whenever their nerves kick in.
- When they're about to begin, focus on the most important things. For example, in a regatta, it would be the starter's alignment, the boat's position, where and how they sit on their seat, their grip on the oar and the first stroke. If racing in a crew or playing in a team sport, athletes can say positive words to those around them. Provide encouragement without blatantly talking it up or being loud and obnoxious. Athletes should not bother distracting other teams; instead they should focus on their own team and what they can control. Athletes competing well is about controlling themselves and unleashing their power in a technically confined framework. Getting overly pumped up and aggressive rarely helps fine motor skills.

These strategies worked for me. Create your own and reap the rewards of better and more consistent performances.

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