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**Mental Training Tool:
Assessment as a Learning Process**
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Once the area of mental skills is identified by athletes as an aspect they wish to improve, coaches are then left with the task of deciding how to assess athletes' current usage and level of ability in this area in order to design an effective program. When we think of assessing nutrition or physiology in athletes, a number of tests or exercises spring to mind that athletes can engage in, in order to help them determine their subsequent course of action. However, when it comes to assessing mental skills in athletes, the choices are less clear. As this initial stage is a vital component of the overall mental skills training program, coaches need to be exposed to assessment procedures that are appropriate for them to use and that can benefit the athletes involved.

The key to the assessment process is to view it, not as a separate step, but rather as a comprehensive part of the program. Coaches can begin to help athletes develop their understanding and direction in the area of mental training at this preliminary stage. This goal can be achieved by selecting assessment tools that promote active learning and engage the athletes in the assessment process. The goal of this paper is to explore two such assessment tools, the Mental Training Exercises (MTE) 1 and 2 as developed by Terry Orlick and John Partington (Orlick & Partington, 2000; Partington & Orlick, 2000) and to examine how coaches can use these tools to help their athletes understand and develop their mental skills.

Understanding Assessment

Before exploring the MTEs, it is important to determine exactly what is meant by the word assessment as it relates to mental skills training. Poczwadowski, Sherman and Henschen (1998) defined assessment as "identifying the athlete, coach, or organization's needs, wants, strengths and weaknesses with respect to psychological aspects that are critical to individual or collective growth within the sport environment" (p. 195). If we take this definition a little further and consider that assessment can also be a valuable learning opportunity for athletes (and coaches), we can define assessment as an ongoing process whereby athletes actively engage in identifying, determining and refining their mental skills through the process of reflection and articulation. This process is further supplemented by ongoing constructive evaluations and feedback. This definition highlights that assessment, in and of itself, is not stagnant, but rather, active. As individuals learn and develop, their needs and skill levels change. Consequently, assessment procedures should also be active with the meanings that the athletes derive from the experience playing a central part in the process.

As a result, coaches who are looking to assess athletes' mental skills should consider assessment tools that engage the athletes in active learning. These types of tools will allow the athletes to direct and reflect upon their own learning through meaningful exercises that engage

them in opportunities to share their experiences. Assessment for the athletes then becomes a fun exercise in self-discovery as opposed to a potentially sterile and intimidating process.

Mental Training Exercises (MTE) 1 and 2

Both Orlick and Partington have extensive experience working with top level performers (Orlick & Partington, 1986, 1988; Orlick, 1990). Their idea to develop the MTE 1 (Partington & Orlick, 2000) and 2 (Orlick & Partington, 2000) emerged from requests from athletes who wanted a more comprehensive way of understanding, attaining and/or adjusting their mental skills. Orlick and Partington's challenge was to develop a meaningful assessment process whereby athletes could actively discover their present mental strengths and direct their own areas for improvement. Two exercises arose from this challenge -- the MTE-1 which focuses primarily on mental aspects related to practice and the MTE-2, which focuses on the mental aspects related to competition. All items in the MTE 1 and 2 reflect elements that top level performers indicate contribute to their ability to achieve high level goals.

For coaches, the main advantage of these tools is that the athletes play an active rather than passive role in the assessment process. Athletes are required to reflect on their past performances in practice and competition, identify their usage of various strategies and determine their mental goals for the future. In addition, they are able to refer back to the tools as a way of monitoring their improvement in the various areas. The tools are uncomplicated and easy to understand and apply. Both tools are presented here, their components described and sample questions from each section provided.¹

MTE 1 - Mental Training Exercise for Quality Practice

The MTE-1 (Partington & Orlick, 2000) consists of 39 items which explore athletes' perception of their behaviours in four mental training areas related to practice: commitment, goal-setting, imagery and attentional focusing. The questions reflect top athletes' ideas about the mental components necessary for quality practice.

Commitment

Commitment is an essential component of top level performances. When athletes decide the level of commitment that they will make to their sport, they are better able to guide their future choices and accept the necessary sacrifices in their lives. Orlick (2000) indicates that excellence is possible when athletes demonstrate high levels of dedication, self-discipline, passion and love for what they do. Athletes who have made a commitment to their sport will constantly strive to improve and adjust their performance even in the face of less favourable performance outcomes. Athletes who have a sound understanding of their commitment level are more able to adjust their training, priorities and expectations. In exploring their commitment to their sport, athletes respond to questions in the MTE-1 such as:

- Are you willing to sacrifice other things to excel at your sport?
- Are you determined to keep pushing yourself and never give up in trying to achieve your sport goals?

- Do you take personal responsibility for mistakes and work hard to correct them?
- Do you give 100% in practice (whether it is going well or not so well)?
- Do you put in extra time for mental and physical preparation before, after or between regular practice sessions?

Goals

Goal setting can contribute to athletes' direction, focus and belief. By setting specific target areas to improve, athletes can acknowledge their past and current achievements and envision and chart out their future. Goals also contribute to athletes' ability to identify and focus on the appropriate areas determined to enhance their performance. Concomitantly, it allows them to see themselves progressing even in situations where their motivation may be challenged such as practice. By knowing what areas to focus on, athletes are also better at identifying and overcoming potential distractors in training. Finally, as athletes witness themselves achieving their goals, their confidence and belief develops. Ultimately, this allows them to set and achieve more difficult goals. In examining their goal setting ability, athletes respond to questions in the MTE-1 such as:

- Before practice or training do you set specific mental goals, for example, to stay positive, to focus only on what you want to do, or to put away distractions?
- During practice, before you execute a skill piece, drill, routine or play sequence, do you set a specific goal by deciding exactly what you want to do, and exactly how you want to do it?
- During practice when there is a break in the action, do you take the time to think about what worked and what didn't work in trying to achieve your goals?
- After practice do you decide exactly what you want to do next time, based on thinking about what worked and what didn't work last time?

Mental Imagery

Imagery is useful for guiding athletes' belief, focus and performance. Through imagery athletes can pre-experience and re-experience feelings, sensations, actions and/or skills that are part of their desired performance. Top level performers experience clear, positive, process-oriented images as real feelings in their body and mind. These images serve to guide athletes' actions, reactions and experiences. Athletes can reflect on their imagery ability by responding to questions in the MTE-1 such as:

- During practice, before you do a skill, drill or play sequence, do you take a moment to run the skill through your mind?
- When the coach gives you feedback or suggestions do you try to clearly imagine or feel what you are being asked to do before attempting to do it?
- After doing a less than perfect skill or play sequence, do you imagine yourself doing it better, before actually trying it again?
- Take a moment now to imagine yourself doing a basic movement, skill, element or sequence, that you do regularly in your sport. After trying this, respond to the following questions:

- ♦ How close was it to the way you actually do it?
- ♦ Did you experience the physical sensations in your body that you actually feel when you do it?
- ♦ Did you see things as if you were outside your own body doing it?
- ♦ Did you see things as if watching a video of yourself doing it?
- ♦ In your imagery, could you hold on to the feeling or image throughout the skill or sequence?

Practice Focus

Focus is arguably the most important mental skill. It is the central component of many athletes' best performances or zone experiences and the key component in the concept of 'FLOW', the process of total absorption in an activity (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). The ability to be able to completely focus on the task at hand, attend and respond appropriately to all relevant cues, and be undisturbed by distractions and elements both within and outside athletes' control, can contribute significantly to desired performance outcomes. During practice new skills are learned, old skills practiced and adjusted as necessary, strategies and decision making skills challenged and relevant cues identified. Being able to focus well during practice will enhance athletes' learning and retention and cement key performance components required for competition. Athletes can explore their ability to focus in practice by reflecting and responding to questions in the MTE-1 such as:

- Before practice, if you are thinking about a problem related to home, school or a relationship, are you able to shift gears and leave those concerns behind from the duration of the practice?
- Do you know what kind of focus allows you to perform best in practice situations?
 - ♦ What is your best practice focus?
- During your practice when there are breaks in the action, how successful are you at allowing yourself to take a mental break when it might be helpful?
- During practice there are a number of things that can be distract athletes or take them away from their best focus. After each of the situations listed below indicate how successful you are at getting back on track, into a positive performance focus:
 - ♦ Making an error or screwing up?
 - ♦ Coach getting on your case or making a negative comment?
 - ♦ Negative thoughts or worries about teammates?
 - ♦ Negative thoughts or worries about being monitored or evaluated?
 - ♦ Negative thoughts or worries about being ready for competition?
 - ♦ Negative thoughts or worries about possibly failing?
 - ♦ Negative thoughts or worries about getting hurt or being injured?

MTE-2 - Mental Training Exercise for Quality Performance

Orlick and Partington (2000) divided competition into 3 phases - precompetition, competition and post competition. Each of these phases is believed to demand particular mental skills in order to optimally focus, deal with distractions and maximize performance outcomes. The areas on the MTE- 2 reflect these phases. It consists of 35 questions which explore athletes' perception of their behaviours in five mental training areas related to quality performance: pre-competition

focus, precompetition distraction control, competition focus, competition distraction control and post-competition learning. The items characterize what top level athletes have said about the mental criteria for quality performance.

Precompetition Focus

Precompetition focus refers to the ability to consistently create, adjust and carry the most effective mental state into a performance situation. Often the most effective mental state is a product of both physical and mental strategies that athletes employ to prepare themselves for competition (Orlick, 1986). Top level performers often follow a specific plan prior to competition that allows them to consistently create the necessary thoughts and feelings associated with their optimal performances. Athletes are asked to reflect on their precompetition focus by responding to questions in the MTE-2 such as:

- During the lead-up days or hours before your competition, it is important to think and act in ways that allow you to feel positive and ready to perform. Do you know what works best for you?
 - ◆ What do you do and/or think about that helps you to feel positive during this lead-up time?
- It is important to do and/or think about things that allow you to feel positive, focused, and ready to perform immediately before competing (the last 30 seconds). Do you know what works best for you?
 - ◆ What do you do and/or think about that helps you feel positive and focused immediately before competing (last 30 seconds)?
 - ◆ Are you successful at getting into this positive ready state immediately before competing?

Pre Competition - Distraction Control

Precompetition focus is only effective if it is able to be maintained and regained quickly in the face of distractions. Prior to competition there are a number of factors both internally and externally based that can distract athletes from their ideal focus. Being able to control these distractions in an effective manner and regain the appropriate focus is a vital skill that many top performers possess (Orlick, 2000). When reflecting on their precompetition distraction control ability, athletes are asked to respond to questions in the MTE-2 such as:

- Before your event starts there are a number of things that can distract you or take you away from your best focus. For each of the possible distractions below, how successful are you at refocusing and getting back into your positive ready state:
 - ◆ When worrying about not being ready?
 - ◆ When worrying about losing?
 - ◆ When worrying about getting hurt/being injured?
 - ◆ When worrying about teammates?
 - ◆ When worrying about officials and judges?
 - ◆ When worrying about family/friends?
 - ◆ When worrying about media?

- ♦ When worrying about coach's comments or behaviour?
- What do you do to take a mental break between events of an extended competition or tournament?

Competition Focus

Competition focus is the ability to stay connected to the task at hand, focusing on the relevant cues and responding quickly and appropriately within the environment. Each sport has different psychological demands during the competition depending on the specific physical, technical and logistical demands of the sport (Taylor, 1996). Based on these demands, often sports can be broken down into critical parts or examination points with specific focus reminders to engage in when these stages occur (Orlick, 1986). Competition plans can be useful tools to maintaining and regaining appropriate focus in these situations. Conversely, general cues can be used throughout the performance whenever required to maintain the best focus. Athletes are asked to reflect on their ability to focus during competition by responding to questions in the MTE-2 such as:

- Do you look for advantages or opportunities in every situation you face?
- Do you find reasons to believe in yourself? (Why you can do well)
- Do you know what kind of focus allows you to perform best during competitions?
 - ♦ What is your best competition focus?
- When executing moves, skills, routines or plays in competition, are you able to maintain the "best" focus?

Competition Distraction Control

The inability to deal with distractions appropriately during a competition is arguably one of the leading causes of undesired performance outcomes. Top performers often develop a refocusing plan for competition where they anticipate and identify possible distractors and plan their responses to these elements if and when they arise (Orlick, 2000). Part of this ability is being able to see advantages to every situation even in less than ideal circumstances. In reflecting on their ability to control distractions during competition, athletes are asked to respond to questions in the MTE-2 such as:

- During competitions there are a number of things that can distract athletes and take them away from their best focus. For each of the situations below, how successful are you at getting back on track, into your positive performance focus:
 - ♦ After making an error?
 - ♦ Poor officiating?
 - ♦ Opponents outstanding performance?
 - ♦ Not feeling 100%?
 - ♦ Negative thoughts?
 - ♦ Coach's comments or behaviour?
 - ♦ Environmental conditions (e.g., the weather or facility)?
 - ♦ Change in momentum?
 - ♦ Being evaluated?
 - ♦ Thinking about the outcome?

Post Competition Learning

Mental skills do not end once the competition is over. Learning is ongoing and the successes and/or failures in one competition can lead to valuable lessons contributing to performance gains in the next competition. Top level performers take the time to extract the learning from each situation and apply it to the next (Orlick, 2000). In essence that is what post competition learning is -- the ability to effectively analyze performance and draw out valuable lessons that will facilitate future development. When reflecting on their ability to learn post competition, athletes are asked to respond to questions in the MTE-2 such as:

- After competition/games or performances are you successful at drawing out lessons that can help you for the next time?
- Do you act on these lessons you draw out at your next practice or competition?

Self-Evaluation

Both the MTE-1 and 2 end with a self-evaluation section where athletes can reflect on their responses to the exercises and determine what areas need improvement. This section allows athletes an opportunity to actively construct their knowledge through reflection and articulation thus promoting their awareness. Awareness develops when athletes are challenged to reflect on feedback, identify their strengths and weaknesses and correct and refine their responses. Athletes are asked to reflect on, and respond to, questions in the MTE-2 such as:

- Please share what you think are your mental strengths.
- What do you feel are your strengths that can help you perform well in competitions?
- Where do you think you need most work to improve?
- Where do you think you need to improve the level or consistency of your performance in competitions?
- What are you going to do to prepare yourself to perform your best?

How to Use the MTE 1 and 2

When deciding how to use the MTEs, coaches need to consider the athletes involved and the amount of time that will be invested in the assessment process. The MTEs can be used in both a self-directed and guided discovery fashion as well as individually and with groups. At this preliminary stage coaches can ask themselves the following questions to help them determine in which way to best use the assessment tools:

- What is the age/experience level of the athletes?
⇒ *Younger or less experienced athletes may need more guidance and education in the area of mental skills.*
- What is the athletes' knowledge and understanding with respect to mental skills?
⇒ *Athletes with little or no understanding of mental skills may need more guidance and education in this area.*

- How motivated are the athletes to improve their mental skills?
⇒ *Athletes who are motivated to improve their mental skills are more likely to spend time and energy completing the forms and can potentially work well through both guided discover and self-directed procedures.*

- How much time am I, the coach, willing to invest in this process?
⇒ *If coaches approach mental training with the same energy and effort as they do physical, technical and tactical training, then athletes are more likely to view it as a necessary part of practice and competition and thus practice the required skills.*

- What relevant resources can I provide for the athletes?
⇒ *There are a number of excellent resources out there from video tapes to web pages that can facilitates athletes' discovery with respect to mental skills. Coaches should familiarize themselves with these resources either through personal experience or by seeking the advice of a sport psychologist or mental trainer.*

Once coaches have answered these question, they may have a better idea of how to best use the MTEs in their program. The following table demonstrates the 4 different ways of carrying out the assessment process with the MTEs.

		Self-Directed	
		Athletes are given the MTE 1 & 2 and encouraged to work through them on their own, drawing from personal experiences and suggested relevant resources to develop their action plan.	Athletes are given the MTE 1 & 2 and encouraged to work through them on their own, drawing from personal experiences, teammates and suggested relevant resources to develop their action plan.
Individual			Group
		After completing MTE 1 & 2, athletes will review areas in sessions with the coach. Together, the athlete and coach highlight strengths, areas for improvement, prioritize areas for improvement and develop the action plan.	MTE 1 and 2 can be administered to the athletes as a whole or in parts, supplemented by interactive educational and planning sessions and/or written individual feedback.
		Guided-Discovery	

Regardless of the approach chosen, athletes should be supported by an environment in which they are encouraged and challenged to develop their mental skills in concert with the physical, technical and tactical strategies (see Farres, 2000 for a detailed discussion). Through an

environment that supports active learning, athletes can assess and develop their mental skills optimally.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to explore two assessment tools, Mental Training Exercises 1 and 2, and to examine how coaches can use these tools to help their athletes understand and develop mental skills. The main benefit of these two tools is that the athletes play an active part in the assessment process and that through the assessment, athletes can learn more about mental skills in general and about their individual strengths and areas to improve. The tools are easy to use and understand and can be modified to fit the specific situation. I invite coaches to explore the MTEs as a comprehensive part of their mental training program.

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¹ Excerpts from the MTE 1 & 2 are presented here with the permission of Dr. Terry Orlick. For a complete copy of the MTE 1 and 2, please feel free to contact either the author of this article, Laura Farres at drlaura@mindinmotion.ca or Dr. Terry Orlick at excel@zxccl.com