Mindfulness: Improving Sports Performance & Reducing Sport Anxiety

Athletes spend much of their time mentally and physically preparing for athletic competitions in hopes of improving playing performances. However, many athletes are inconsistent with their athletic performances due to anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and other barriers (Mamassis & Doganis, 2004). Athletes who experience sport related anxiety may also suffer from feelings of worthlessness, physical/emotional exhaustion, and a reduced sense of fulfillment (Lemyre, Roberts, & Stray-Gunderson, 2007). Some athletes dwell on past performances or worry about future actions, and they may lose focus on their current situations. Such athletes attend to their internal thoughts and feelings instead of fully immersing themselves in the present moment (Moore, 2009). Mindful athletes may have heightened awareness and acceptance of internal and external stimuli that may allow them to devote their attention and energy to their athletic performances (Moore, 2009). Mindfulness, or non-judgmental present-moment awareness, may help athletes improve their concentration, thus helping them improve their sports performances (Bernier, Thienot, Codron, & Fournier, 2009; Gardner & Moore, 2004). Being mindful can also help athletes enjoy their sports, which can reduce the potential for burnout.

The following sections explore mindfulness as it relates to sport performance, including (a) dispositional mindfulness; (b) mindfulness-based interventions; and (c) sport anxiety.

Dispositional Mindfulness

Many athletes are critical of their past performances or concerned about their future performance-related behaviors, so they may lose focus on their current situations. Mindfulness, the non-judgmental awareness or focus on the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Schmidt & Kupper, 2012; Ulmer,
Mindfulness also allows athletes to become aware of personal thoughts, feelings, and other internal stimuli and encourages athletes to focus on personal values or processes of sport related skills and game strategies instead of focusing on performance outcomes (Pineau, Glass, & Kaufman, 2014). Awareness and acceptance of the present moment may allow athletes to focus less on negative thoughts, which may provide athletes with more energy and focus for the athletic tasks at hand (Pineau et al., 2014). Mindful athletes may be better equipped to allow the focus of their attention to be directed toward task-relevant external stimuli, such as opponents, and behavioral choices, such as implementation of skills and strategies that may lead to improved athletic performance (Moore, 2009). Thus, mindfulness allows individuals to concentrate their attention on the present moment and not dwell on the past nor worry about the future. Additionally, instead of changing or stopping unwanted thoughts, mindfulness teaches athletes to play with such thoughts (Bernier et al., 2009; Gardner & Moore, 2004). This is important for athletes because concern about past or future performances may prevent them from performing their best or from enjoying their sport.

**Mindfulness-based Interventions**

Mental preparation can be optimized through properly implemented, progressive mindfulness training, and optimal mental preparation may enhance physiological readiness. Mindfulness-based interventions have resulted in numerous physiological effects such as decreased pre-competition salivary cortisol associated with decreased pre-competition stress (John, Verma, & Khanna, 2011), decreased resting heart rate (Hewett, Ransdell, Gao, Petlichkoff, & Lukas, 2011), and decreased pain sensitivity (Kingston, Chadwick, Meron, & Skinner, 2007; Zeiden, Gordon, Merchant, &
Goolkasian, 2010). These physiological effects may enhance sport performance and may also decrease risk of athlete burnout. Mindfulness training may also help athletes improve concentration and reduce anxiety, which may lead to enhanced athletic performance (Bernier et al., 2009; Gardner & Moore, 2004).

**Sport Anxiety and Mindfulness**

Athletes train to improve their physical skills or tactics to increase their sport-confidence and sense of control, which helps counter the adverse effects of their anxiety (Stavrou, Jackson, Zervas, & Karteroliotis, 2007). Athletes can also increase their mindfulness to reduce their sport anxiety. Increased mindfulness helps individuals to become aware of their stressors, reflect on the situation, and act accordingly. By regulating reactions to potential stressors, the perceived stress is decreased, and by developing an awareness of their breathing, mindful individuals may have calming effects on their sympathetic nervous systems, thus decreasing their resting heart rates (Hewett et al., 2011). A lower resting heart rate can lead to improved physical performances due to more efficient heart function and greater endurance, as well as lower perceived exhaustion. Additionally, mindful individuals may become aware of their ability to alter their sympathetic nervous systems (Hewett et al., 2011), which may lead to a greater sense of control, thus reducing anxiety.

**Practical Application**

Despite how physically ready athletes are for competition, their performances may suffer if they do not have control over their minds. Improving mindfulness, or participating in mindfulness-based interventions may help athletes monitor and cope with their sport related anxiety, help them focus during their competitions, and help boost their confidence. Athletes are looking for whatever will give them the advantage, so why not try mindfulness?


