



The Psychology of Sports

By Dr. Linda Hancock

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Hancock has written a regular weekly column entitled "All Psyched Up" for newspapers in two Canadian provinces for more than a dozen years. Over the years, her readers and clients have said that they have benefited from her common-sense solutions, wisdom, and sense of humour. Dr. Linda Hancock, the author of "Life is An Adventure...every step of the way" and "Open for Business Success" is a Registered Psychologist who has a private practice in Medicine Hat. She can be reached at 403-529-6877 or through email office@drlindahancock.com

Published

December 1st, 2008

I'm not much of an athlete but I have been described by others as being "a good sport". That has more to do with my attitude than my ability. Over the past few decades, the combination of Psychology and sports has become big business. Teams and individuals frequently seek out the services of a psychologist to help them improve their game and win in their chosen field. Imagine each of us as a triangle that is suspended from the ceiling in mobile fashion. The top angle is our thinking or cognition. The angle on the left side is our feeling or affect and the angle on the right side is our behaviour or choices. Each of us strives for and is most stable when the three are in balance. Unfortunately, our North American society tends to be heavy on the left or feeling side. Frequently I hear clients state "I don't feel like doing that". If we lead from our feelings, life becomes quite chaotic.

I am a Cognitive-Behavioural therapist in that I tend to focus on the top and right angles of the triangle. In fact, I encourage my clients to have the thinking (cognition) as the engine of the train and the feelings (affect) as the caboose. Sports psychologists also tend to work from the top of the triangle. They help the athlete to develop a mindset of success. Behaviour follows and the celebrations (feelings) result. Let's put this in perspective. Imagine that Tiger Woods had ability but thought that he was a "loser". We would likely have never heard of him! His thoughts opened up the possibilities that resulted in his achievement. There has been a great deal of research in the area of sports psychology.

One trial involved basketball players who were divided into three groups. One group was told not to practice during a two-week period of time. A second group was told they were not to practice but, during their regular practice time, they were to sit on the bench and imagine shooting baskets. The third group had regular practices. After the two weeks, the group who hadn't practiced did poorly, but the other two groups were almost identical in the number of baskets they made in the next game. Thinking made it so! The media has lately been reporting a number of cases where athletes are losing their star status due to personal problems. This usually results when the individual has trouble dealing with his or her feelings. Frequently they turn to alcohol, drugs or use other methods to handle those feelings in an unhealthy manner and not only lose their athletic prowess but also end up in the headlines! They have let their feelings lead their lives.

Let's apply theory at a personal level. We are all encouraged towards healthy living practices, which include exercise. This has bothered me for some time because exercise would never be first on my priority list and I found it difficult to find a sport or activity that I would enjoy doing repeatedly. After many failed attempts I finally began to implement sport psychology techniques. I began to THINK about what I had enjoyed as a child and went back to my youth when I took swimming lessons at Katapwa Lake. The water could be cold, wavy or even green with algae, but the feeling of floating was wonderful.

First I had to deal with the fact that I hadn't been in a bathing suit for many, many years because of pride (or foolishness) and next I needed to consider purchasing one that would be suitable (or merely acceptable). The third step in my changed lifestyle involved a commitment. I knew that all the health practitioners recommend exercising three times a week. (This part would be hard, but I made a commitment). Next, my thoughts needed to be converted into BEHAVIOUR. Because of my very busy schedule, I decided to move into a condo that had a pool open to residents 24 hours a day. Frequently, I come home late or

wake up in the night, don my bathing suit and head for the pool where I usually have the whole thing to myself. As I float, I think about my youth and the blessings in my life.

Often, I even write my newspaper columns in my head. The result of my sports psychology is positive AFFECT. I feel good about the fact that I am not only taking care of my health but also enjoying the experience. As well, I liked the look on my doctor's face last week when we figured out that I have lost 15 pounds since August. It sounds quite sophisticated to read about sports psychology, but it is really very simple. Begin with your THINKING, followed by BEHAVIOUR and then enjoy the AFFECT. Kind of like elementary school when we had a "THINK AND DO" book. Now it's time for you to be your own sports psychologist. Are you ready? Batter up!