Establishing a Solid Foundation

Learning to coach for the Inner Edge begins with the basics. The first six chapters in Part 1 are designed to provide you with a solid foundational understanding of sport psychology. In the first chapter, the field of sport psychology is explained as it relates to coaching effectiveness. Then, we move on to the basic topics of coaching philosophy, motivation, communication, leadership, and team cohesion. As shown below in Figure 1.1, these basic topics form the building blocks needed for the Inner Edge. Your athletes gain the Inner Edge when they are part of a program in which

- there is a consistent and effective coaching philosophy,
- motivation is nurtured and enhanced in athletes,
- communication flows easily and honestly,
- innovative leadership is provided, and
- the whole is stronger than the parts through team cohesion.

Read with an open mind. Learn from the master coaches and elite athletes who are described throughout these chapters. Consider the ways in which you can use this knowledge in your program with your athletes. Be thoughtful, innovative, and willing to move beyond your comfort zone and familiar ways of thinking. Get the Inner Edge!

![Figure 1.1 Building Blocks for the Inner Edge](image-url)
Chapter One
Understanding Sport Psychology

Chapter Preview
In this chapter, you’ll learn:
• what sport psychology is about
• how sport psychology integrates with other sport sciences
• how the objectives of sport psychology may be thought of as a “triad”
• about research in sport psychology that supports the triad

Michael Johnson let the pressure wash over him as he stood on the track waiting for the start of the 200 meter race in the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. The entire world knew that he was attempting to become the first man to strike Olympic gold in both the 200 and 400 meter races. Amazingly, Johnson seemed eager to create more pressure for himself by confidently stating his intention to win both races and then appearing on the track in glistening gold shoes as a public declaration that anything less than gold medals in both races would be a failure. He won the 400 meter race in Olympic record time, and now faced his second challenge, which he wanted the most. Later, Johnson revealed what he was thinking at this moment: “There was pressure from the . . . people who expect you to win . . . But I crave [pressure]. I live for that very moment in the blocks” (Moore, 1996, p. 30). Johnson exploded from the blocks to win the race in a world record 19.32 seconds, a time that most track aficionados would not have predicted to occur until a few decades later.

Most all athletes have experienced the intoxication of peak performance in sport, although most of us will not achieve our peak performances in the Olympic Games as did Michael Johnson. Sport arouses passion and competitive intensity in us because we all have at least briefly experienced being in the zone or performing at a level commensurate with our physical and mental potential. What a feeling it is to experience this
zone where performance seems so automatic and even effortless! However, it is far more typical for athletes to perform when they are not in this automatic, optimal performance zone. This requires athletes to be mentally skilled, to focus effectively and manage their thoughts, emotions, and actions during competition. The goal for any athlete is to perform optimally, whether that involves performing in the zone or being mentally skilled to perform well when things are not automatically clicking. The quest to understand, and help athletes achieve, optimal performance in sport has spawned the various sport sciences, or areas of systematic study and research, such as sport physiology, sport biomechanics, sport medicine, and sport psychology.

Consider how Michael Johnson used knowledge from the sport sciences in achieving his peak performance. Sport physiology was important in designing appropriate fitness training for the specific energy demands of the 200 and 400 meter sprint races. Sport biomechanics was important in helping Johnson develop and refine his individualized running technique, which allowed him maximum acceleration and minimum drag to enhance his speed. Sport medicine played an important role in providing the latest injury treatment and rehabilitation in his training for the Olympics. And finally, Johnson utilized principles from sport psychology to remain mentally tough throughout years of grueling workouts, to develop and maintain a competitive focus free of distraction, and to optimize his energy level at the point of competition to enable his mind to control his body to achieve its maximum performance.

Although sport psychology is the focus of this book, it should be noted that all of the sport sciences work in an integrated fashion to enhance sport performance. Michael Johnson had earned his ability to be confident based on his persistence in a sound physiological training program. His physical and mental energy levels were primed at their optimal point in relation to the physiological needs of this specific event. His competitive focus was developed in concert with his biomechanical technique training in which he learned how most efficiently to direct his attention to run using proper mechanical form. Effective sport performance is the culmination of knowledge gained from all the sport sciences, although our primary interest in this book is in sport psychology.

**What is Sport Psychology?**

Sport psychology is the study of how individuals think, act, and feel when participating in sport. Thus, sport psychologists are interested in how the thoughts, behaviors, and emotions of athletes influence and are influenced by their sport participation. Think about this relationship. What are examples of ways that athletes’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are linked to the social context of sport? Why does an intelligent, easy-going ice hockey player drop his gloves and fight with an opponent on the ice? Why do athletes believe that it’s harder to win on the road than at home (and often let this belief affect their performance)? Why would a talented high school basketball player, who is being wooed by every college coach in the country, suddenly lose her shooting touch in the championship playoffs?

These questions all capture the **psychosocial aspects of sport participation**— which is the focus of study in sport psychology. This simply refers to the ways in which psychological factors (e.g., personality of the athlete) interact with social factors in sport (e.g., competitive pressure, leadership style of coaches, crowd size) to influence athletes and their performance. The hockey player fights because hockey is marketed as an aggressive sport, and hockey players are encouraged and expected to fight to increase fan attendance. The home advantage has been documented in sport meaning that statistics show that teams win more at home than on the road. However, the home advantage has been talked about so much by coaches and the media that athletes often put themselves at a psychological disadvantage by believing it. This socially constructed belief affects athletes’ competitive behavior in terms of effort and confidence, which subsequently hurts their performance on the road. The talented basket-

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**Personal Plug-In**

What questions do you have about the psychosocial aspects of sport participation? Identify 3-4 questions about sport psychology that you think are the most interesting. Be creative—ask hard questions!
ball player in our example probably fell prey to competitive stress based on the increasing pressure of performing well to carry her team to a championship, earning a college scholarship, and gaining the approval of her parents and coach. In other words, the social pressures she faced influenced her thinking, and detracted from her ability to relax and focus on the process of playing.

**Objectives of Sport Psychology: The Triad**

From a practical standpoint, three objectives of sport psychology are presented in this chapter for athletes and coaches. These three objectives represent a triad that emphasizes that the field of sport psychology attempts to help athletes achieve (a) optimal performance, (b) optimal development, and (c) optimal experiences in sport.

**Achieving Optimal Performance**

Research has shown that sport psychology interventions, or mental training, can enhance athletes’ performances in a variety of sports (e.g., Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001; Greenspan & Felz, 1989; Patrick & Hrycaiko, 1989; Thelwell & Greenlees, 2001). Several of the techniques presented in this book, such as imagery, relaxation, and purposeful self-talk, have been shown to enhance athletes’ performance. At the elite level, such as the Olympics and World Championships, a consistent finding is that successful athletes engage in systematic mental preparation more so than less successful athletes (Greenleaf et al., 2001; Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1992a, 1992b, 1993; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999). In a study of professional baseball players, mental skills were just as predictive of batting averages as were players’ physical skills, and for pitchers, their mental skills were more important in predicting their success than their physical skills (Smith, Schutz, Smoll, & Ptacek, 1995). In addition, mental skills were predictive of players’ survival in professional baseball two and three years later (Smith & Christensen, 1995).

Clearly, coaches understand that athletes who are mentally skilled in terms of confidence, coping ability, and concentration typically perform better than those athletes who are less mentally skilled. Research supports this observation, and in addition demonstrates that mental skills can be taught to athletes, which in turn enhances their performance. Thus, helping athletes achieve optimal performance certainly is an important objective of sport psychology. But does that mean that sport psychologists are only concerned with performance? Absolutely not. The two other important objectives of sport psychology are helping athletes achieve optimal development and helping athletes achieve optimal experiences. Because performance (and winning) is so important in our society, the objectives of optimal development and experiences for athletes are often overlooked.

**Achieving Optimal Development**

Earl Woods says, “If you treat your child with admiration, respect and love, a miracle will occur” (Reilly, 1995, p. 66). The miracle in this case is Earl’s son—Tiger Woods—who at age 21 won the prestigious Masters golf tournament, and has since fulfilled predictions that he could be the greatest golfer of all time. In Tiger’s first big tournament as a child, Earl took him to the first tee and said, “Son, I want you to know I love you no matter how you do. Enjoy yourself” (Reilly, 1995, p. 65). The rise of Tiger Woods to stardom has been chronicled not only due to his outstanding physical abilities as a golfer, but also due to the unique environment in which he developed his competitive skills. His father prepared him to handle the psychological rigors of competition, but he did it in a way that allowed Tiger to develop his physical and mental skills without the stress of disappointing or letting down his parents which has been shown to be a source of stress for many young athletes. And not once did his parents ever insist that he practice. Tiger Woods developed the internal motivation to learn and improve his game without constant needling from his parents or coaches.

Tiger Woods, a megastar on the professional golf tour, represents the second objective of sport psychology—optimal development. Not everyone can become a successful and famous professional athlete like Tiger Woods, but the field of sport psychology attempts to help all athletes experience the optimal development of their physical skills as well as the optimal development of important self-perceptions such as feelings of self-worth and competence.
A great deal of research in sport psychology supports the importance of optimal development as an important goal for sport psychology. This research indicates that by focusing on personal development, individuals can enhance the quality of their sport participation. Children join sport teams to develop skill, have fun, and be with their friends (Lee, Whitehead, & Balchin, 2000; Weiss & Petlichkoff, 1989). Sure, winning becomes an important objective for athletes at later ages, but it’s clear that kids really just want to learn how to play. All developmental theories of motivation emphasize that children must develop a sense of autonomy or ability to master physical skills to feel personally competent before they can engage in intense social comparison such as competition. Children lose motivation to participate in sport when they set unrealistically high standards usually in comparison to other athletes or when they play only for external reasons (e.g., pleasing their parents, winning trophies). For example, researchers have shown that 8-12-year-old children who participated in a mastery-oriented sport climate that emphasized personal improvement developed higher skill levels and were more motivated to continue than children who participated in a competitive-oriented sport climate (Theeboom, De Knop, & Weiss, 1995). The secret to keeping kids motivated to participate in sport is to help them to develop skills and improve, so that later they can meet the challenges of competition.

Many people mistakenly believe that an emphasis on development is important for children, but that adults should have a more mature perspective and focus on outcomes. But this is not true! Research has shown that one of the characteristics of highly successful Olympic and World Champion athletes is that they clearly define personal performance goals for each day of training and that their competition focus plans emphasize a task performance focus, as compared to less successful athletes that tend to think more about possible outcomes and upcoming competitors (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1992a; Orlick & Partington, 1988). In Chapter 8, you will learn how to design individualized goal maps so that you can chart the developmental progression of athletes in achieving their goals in sport.

Achieving Optimal Experiences

Consider the following quotes to better understand why optimal experience is an important objective in sport psychology.

“The most memorable match I ever had as a pure tennis player, playing for the love of the game and the competition, was a match I lost— the Wimbledon final of 1990 against Edberg. I was down two sets to love, I came back and had a 3-1 lead in the fifth. Eventually, I lost 6-4 in the fifth. It isn’t important that I lost that match, because I was on top of my game, I sensed the beauty and joy of the game, I stuck with it through the ups and downs and I played like a champion. That’s good enough for me.” Boris Becker, winner of six Grand Slam events, including three Wimbledon titles (Becker, 1998, p. 54)

“As a white-water canoeist I discovered that the challenge of running a river is not a conflict between human and nature, it is a melding together of the two. You do not conquer a river, you experience it. The calculated risk, the momentary sense of meaning, and the intensity of the experience let you emerge exhilarated and somehow better. It is a quest for self-fulfillment rather than a quest for victory over others or over the river. Many sports can be viewed in the same way. Each experience or exploration can lead to enlightenment and discovery. There is no way to fail to experience the experience, and experiencing becomes the goal. The experience may lead to improved performance, self-discovery, personal satisfaction, and greater awareness, or it may simply be interesting in its own right.” Terry Orlick, internationally-known sport psychology consultant (Orlick, 1990, p. 5)

“I had learned what it means to ride the Tour de France. It’s not about the bike. It’s a metaphor for life, not only the longest race in the world but also the most exalting and heartbreaking and potentially tragic. It poses every conceivable element to the rider . . . and above all a great, deep self-questioning. During our lives we’re faced with so many different elements as well, we experience so many setbacks, and fight such a hand-to-hand battle with failure, head down in the rain, just trying to stay upright and to have a little hope. The Tour is not just a bike race, not at all. It is a test. It tests you physically, it tests you mentally, and it even tests you morally.” Lance Armstrong, six-time winner of the Tour de France (Armstrong, 2001, pp. 68-69)
What do you notice about these quotes? It seems that Boris Becker, Terry Orlick, and Lance Armstrong were highly motivated to achieve optimal experiences as they faced the challenges of professional tennis, raging rivers, and the French Alps. Becker is a great tennis champion who won multiple Wimbledon titles, Orlick is a highly successful consultant and author, and Lance Armstrong is a six-time Tour de France champion. Yet they clearly indicate that for them, focusing only on the outcome misses the essence of what their sports mean to them. These examples emphasize the importance of the third objective of sport psychology, which is to help athletes understand how to achieve optimal experiences in their sport participation. Sport psychologists want to help athletes enjoy quality sport experiences, to have fun, to feel more competent and worthy, and to gain personal fulfillment and meaning through their sport participation. Athletes don’t have to be world-class tennis players or Olympians to enjoy optimal experiences in sport. Thus, the material in this book is designed for coaches at all levels who want to apply some basic ideas from sport psychology to help athletes more fully enjoy their sport experiences.

Can you remember a time when you were engaged in an activity that was so absorbing that you completely lost track of time? If you can, then you are recalling your experience of flow. Flow, originally defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as an optimal mental state involving total absorption in a task, is what most athletes refer to as being in the zone. Most everyone involved in sport has enjoyed this feeling of sheer absorption, or flow, and it is this feeling that typically leads individuals to fall in love with sport and seek out these feelings when playing sport.

Flow is not the same as peak performance, but in sport, flow often coincides with or results in peak performance, and the strategic use of mental skills during competition is associated with achieving flow (Jackson, Thomas, Marsh, & Smethurst, 2000). Interestingly, athletes indicate that getting into flow involves such factors as maintaining an appropriate task focus, keeping a positive mental attitude, and feeling physically ready to perform. Research with hundreds of elite athletes from various sports has supported several common characteristics of the peak performance state such as effortless performance, sense of control, lack of conscious thinking about performance, extraordinary awareness of what other athletes are going to do, and feeling highly energized (Cohn, 1991; Jackson, 1992; Loehr, 1984; Ravizza, 1977). Consider the following description of an athlete’s flow experience:

I felt like I could do almost anything, as if I were in complete control. I really felt confident and positive... I felt physically very relaxed, but really energized and pumped up. I experienced virtually no anxiety or fear, and the whole experience was enjoyable. I experienced a very real sense of calmness and quiet inside, and everything just seemed to flow automatically... Even though I was really hustling, it was all very effortless (Garfield & Bennett, 1984, pp. 37, 95).

These characteristics of flow and peak performance seem to fuel athletes’ passion for their sport participation. Flow experiences are described as autotelic, which means that the experience of playing sport is a reward in itself without concern for the outcome. Thus, sport psychology often focuses on ways to help athletes achieve optimal experiences to enhance the joy and personal meaning that sport participation can often provide.

In summary, sport psychology attempts to enhance the quality of athletes’ participation in sport by helping them achieve

- optimal performance,
- optimal development, and
- optimal experience.

These three objectives form the sport psychology triad. The examples of Michael Johnson, Tiger Woods, Boris Becker, Terry Orlick, and Lance Armstrong used in this chapter illustrate the three fac-
tors that make up the sport psychology triad. The essence of sport participation involves the thrill of experiencing an optimal performance, the feeling of pride and accomplishment that we experience through the optimal development of competency, and the satisfaction and savoring of an optimal experience that has great meaning in one’s life. Sport psychologists work as teachers, researchers, and consultants to develop and apply knowledge about the psychosocial aspects of sport participation that influence the triad. A common misconception about sport psychology is that it focuses only on performance enhancement. However, the triad emphasizes the importance the field of sport psychology places on not only optimizing the performance of athletes, but also optimizing their development and experiences.

**A Big Picture of the Inner Edge**

In summary, the objectives of sport psychology include the triad of optimal performance, development, and experience for athletes. In the remaining chapters of the book, the various topics in sport psychology that can help coaches and athletes gain the Inner Edge are introduced. In these chapters, you’ll get specific tips about how you as a coach can use sport psychology to get the Inner Edge. Take a look at the big picture of the Inner Edge in Figure 1.2 for an illustration of the sport psychology topics that are in the upcoming chapters of this book.

**A Balanced Triad for the Inner Edge**

The pinnacle of the Inner Edge shown in Figure 1.2 is the triad representing optimal performance, optimal development, and optimal experience. Notice that the triad, shaped as a triangle, is perfectly balanced, meaning that the Inner Edge is achieved when the objectives of optimal performance, development, and experience are in balance. (This is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.) All the other parts of the big picture serve to keep the triad in balance so athletes can achieve the Inner Edge.

**Building Blocks (Chapters 2-6)**

The building blocks that form the foundation for the Inner Edge, shown at the bottom of Figure 1.2, are discussed in the rest of the chapters in Part 1 of the book. A practical and meaningful philosophy for coaches and athletes is the most basic building block to provide a stable and consistent grounding for the Inner Edge. In Chapter 2, the importance of developing and living an effective coaching philosophy is discussed. Motivation (Chapter 3) is the next building block for the Inner Edge, because motivation is the energizer that turns your coaching philosophy into behavioral action in your athletes. The remaining three building blocks are communication, leadership, and team cohesion. The essential human skill of communication is discussed in Chapter 4 to emphasize how your interpersonal skills influence your effectiveness as a coach. In Chapter 5, leadership is discussed as another critical building block for coaches to help athletes achieve optimal performance, development, and experiences in sport. Chapter 6 focuses on team cohesion, so that you may better understand how the elusive team chemistry influences the Inner Edge.

Overall, the five building blocks discussed in Chapters 2-6 ensure that athletes...
• are advantaged by having a coach with a sound and practical coaching philosophy,
• have strong internal motivation to achieve and a coach who understands motivation,
• thrive in a climate characterized by skillful and effective communication,
• reap the benefits of effective decision-making and leadership, and
• belong to a cohesive team.

If any of these building blocks were removed, the foundation for the Inner Edge would be shaken, athletes’ mental skills could be disrupted, and the triad might tip precariously and become unbalanced (see Figure 1.2). We don’t want this to happen! Thus, Part 1 of the book is dedicated to helping coaches understand how to design and build a solid foundation for the Inner Edge.

Mental Training Tool Box (Chapters 7-11)

With these solid building blocks in place, coaches and athletes are now ready to move on to mental training. Part 2 of the book begins with Chapter 7, which introduces coaches to the basic premises behind mental training and attempts to dispel myths about sport psychology and the nature of mental training. The remaining four chapters in Part 2 introduce coaches to the mental training tool box (shown on the left side of Figure 1.2), or the four mental training tools that can be used by coaches to build mental and physical skills in athletes. In Chapter 8, the concept of goal mapping is presented as a tool to help athletes develop a sense of purpose, and to plan and actively pursue their goals in a purposeful manner. In Chapter 9, imagery is introduced as a mental training tool that helps athletes visualize their way to success in sport. In Chapter 10, P³ Thinking is presented to help athletes engage in effective thinking to optimize their performance, development, and experiences. In Chapter 11, physical relaxation is explained as a tool to help athletes identify and reduce physical tension in their bodies. All of these tools are part of the mental training tool box that coaches and athletes carry with them, providing

Figure 1.2 The “big picture” of the Inner Edge
the needed tools for developing and maintaining the Inner Edge.

Although not the focus of this book, a physical training tool box is also shown in Figure 1.2 to emphasize that mental and physical training work hand in hand to help athletes achieve the Inner Edge. Sound fitness training, repetitive practice for skill development and execution, and the effective use of tactics and strategies all contribute to the Inner Edge for athletes. Simulation of competitive situations in training is an extremely important tool to get the Inner Edge in performing in different types of pressure situations. Examples of practicing mental skills through simulation in physical training sessions are provided throughout the book.

**Mental Skills (Chapters 12-14) and Implementation Tips (Chapters 15-16)**

Part 3 of the book presents the three mental skills of attentional focus, energy management, and self-confidence. The ability of athletes to achieve optimal performance, development, and experiences in sport is dependent on their ability to focus attention (Chapter 12), manage competitive energy (Chapter 13), and compete with confidence (Chapter 14). As shown in Figure 1.2, the mental training tools in the tool box are used to enhance the mental skills of athletes. The mental skills rest on the foundational building blocks so that athletes have a consistent and productive environment within which to enhance their focus, confidence, and energy management.

Part 4 of the book (Chapters 15-16) is dedicated to help you integrate your sport psychology knowledge into personalized mental plans that meet the specific needs of your athletes and your program. A cursory knowledge of isolated mental training concepts is not necessarily helpful to coaches and athletes, so Part 4 is designed to help you integrate your knowledge into useful mental training ideas. In Chapter 15, implementation ideas for how to select from the mental training menu are provided, and sample mental training plans are provided for different situations. In Chapter 16, special recipes are provided for common challenges faced by coaches, such as slumps, burnout, inconsistency, and rehabilitation and return from injury.

**Wrapping Up**

You now have the big picture of how to get the Inner Edge as presented in this book. The **Inner Edge** is the advantage that athletes create for themselves by honing the sharpness or keenness of their mental skills. You as the coach can help your athletes gain the Inner Edge in many ways, as shown in Figure 1.2. You can set the foundation by establishing a consistent and effective coaching philosophy, understanding motivation and team cohesion, and being a strong communicator and leader. You can use tools in your mental training and physical training tool boxes to help athletes develop and hone their mental skills to be more focused, energized, and confident. And you can help athletes balance the objectives of optimizing their performance, development, and experiences in sport. The remainder of the book is designed to help you do all these things.

Although the breadth of information may seem overwhelming, it is my intent to provide you with practical examples of how to get started in small ways to incorporate sport psychology into your coaching. Actually, you probably know more than you realize! Many coaches are masters of the Inner Edge. Hopefully, the ideas presented in the book can enable you to more consistently and effectively use sport psychology concepts in training your athletes.

**Summary Points for Chapter 1**

1. Sport psychology is the study of how the thoughts, behaviors, and emotions of athletes influence and are influenced by their sport participation.

2. Knowledge about sport psychology is most useful to sport practitioners when it is integrated with knowledge from the other sport sciences.

3. Sport psychology professionals engage in research, teaching, and consultation with athletes and coaches to develop and apply knowledge related to the psychosocial aspects of sport.

4. All sport psychology topics examine the ways in which the psychological characteristics of athletes interact with the social characteristics of sport and society.

5. The main objectives of sport psychology represent a triad that focuses on gaining the