

GET FIERCE!



Motivational tools to bring out the animal in your athletes.

By Alison Arnold, Ph.D.

You see it all the time. She's a tiger one day and a mouse the next. His vault is sky high in practice but his nose almost hits the vault table after he raises his hand. How do you motivate day-in day-out in a generation of quick fixes and short attention spans? Battling the Wii generation can be rough, but here are some tools to keep your athletes ferociously fired up.

Step One: Create a ferociously motivating climate in your gym.

Research has shown that highly motivated gymnasts are more passionate performers (Valerand, 2000) and the coach/athlete relationship has long been a resource for motivation. When an athlete is motivated, he/she is more aggressive, resilient, persistent, and confident both in practice and competition. It is the coach's role to create a climate and atmosphere in the gym that encourages passionate involvement from his/her athletes. Mageau and Vallerand (2003) have identified seven factors that create a highly motivating and competitive climate for training athletes: 1) provide choice within specific rules and limits; 2) provide a rationale for tasks and limits; 3) acknowledge the other person's feelings and perspectives; 4) provide athletes with opportunities for initiative-taking and independent work; 5) provide competence feedback; 6) avoid controlling behaviors; and 7) prevent ego-involvement in an athlete's performance.

1. Provide choice within specific rules and limits. Allow the athlete to give input on assignments, order of events, numbers, or different types of conditioning on different days. When athletes feel like they are part of the decision process, they are more motivated to complete the task. Their "buy in" is important.

2. Provide a rationale for tasks and limits. It's essential that your athletes understand the reasons for the tasks you are asking of them. Research has shown

that when athletes understand the purpose of the exercise they are doing, they are more motivated and perform with higher levels of excellence (Koestner et al., 1984; Deci et al., 1994).

3. Acknowledge athletes' feelings and perspectives. The connection between an athlete and coach is essential when it comes to aggressive performance.

An athlete who feels emotionally attached to his/her coach experiences a sense of belief, caring, and support that creates confidence on the workout and competition floor. This type of connection requires listening and patience from the coach, but the pay-off is well worth it.

4. Provide athlete with opportunities to do independent work. Athletes who are over-controlled by their coach begin to feel inadequate and incompetent, and athletes who feel both of these things cannot compete with vigor. Coaches who give their athletes limited choices create athletes who take responsibility for their training and their performance.

5. Provide encouraging feedback. When an athlete feels encouraged by his or her coach, they feel the power of confidence beneath them. Solution-focused coaching where the coach focuses on the changes they want to see rather than the mistakes they are currently seeing, helps keep the motivation high through the ups and downs of daily practice.

6. Avoid controlling behaviors. According to Mageau and Vallerand (2003), controlling behaviors include overt control of threats and punishments, criticisms that are personally degrading and guilt-inducing, material rewards related to performance outcomes, and using athletic performance to enhance coaches' ego needs.

7. Prevent coach and parent ego involvement in an athlete's performance. Most high-level athletes are natural pleasers. They want to please their coaches and parents more than anything. It is extremely difficult for an athlete to



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give 100 percent in competition when they perceive their parents' or coaches' self-esteem is tied to the outcome. Too much weight on the outcome from parents and/or coaches is most likely the biggest cause of holding back in competition. The athlete must feel as if the love and respect from their parents is not conditional upon whether or not they compete well.

Step Two: Create monstrously aggressive self-talk

The outside performance of an athlete is always a reflection of the internal dialogue. Teach your athletes how to have self-talk that fills them with confidence, power, and belief. Model intense and confident self-talk in practice so that they learn how to internalize your voice for competition. Mental choreography (MC) is cue words your athletes say to themselves during routines and skills that keep their minds on track. Be sure they are saying the same words virtually every time. Have them do walk-throughs and arm sets saying their words out loud where you can see and hear them. Make sure the MC is aggressive, and activates the type of mindset you'd like to see in competition. Remember: strong mind equals strong body, weak mind equals weak body, and inconsistent mind equals inconsistent body. If you are seeing a lack of intensity on the floor, let that be a sign to you that there is a lack of intensity inside your athlete's

head. Teach them to do MC that is sharp, intense, and naturally rhythmic to the element they are performing. If athletes can perform well in practice but fall apart in competition, they have a mental issue. Derail off-track minds by having your athletes write out their routines and their mental choreography. Go over it with them to be sure they are saying what you would be saying if you were whispering in their ear at the meet.

Step Three: Get creative with motivation.

Fire up your athletes by making sure they are setting both process and outcome goals. Goals help give their training purpose and direction. Research has shown that only three percent of all people set personal goals, but they account for 97 percent of all the income generated here on earth. This fact is also reflected in that the people who set goals are far more successful than others. There is a great deal of literature on the market that includes goal setting, and a popular way of expressing the principles of goal setting is SMART (specific, measurable, adjustable, realistic and time-based). Once they have their goals, have your athletes put them where they can go back and readjust if necessary. On a bad day, direct them to their goal sheet for a attitude adjustment!

Vision Boards. Vision boards are a creative and fun project that helps turn goals into something they can see



every day. A vision board is a collage of pictures or words illustrating the goal of vision of this season. Vision boards are a great out-of-the-gym project that facilitates bonding and clarity of vision. Have each person on your team share his/her board and put them up for daily motivation.

Motivational movies. To pump them up, what's better than *Rocky*, *Miracle*, or *Remember the Titans*? Motivational movies can help change the team's energy when motivation starts to go down. Put one athlete in charge of "movie of the month" and host a "pump up party" at his/her house. Your athletes will come in ready to rumble and you didn't even have to give a speech.

Motivational Games. Get creative with games and contests. When times are slow there is nothing like a spirit stick or stickers to get everyone in some friendly competition. Even during season, games can fuel a failing fire and push your athletes to new levels of excellence.

Step Four: The Three C's of motivation.

Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000) propose that coaches influence athletic motivation through three basic psychological needs. The first of these is competence. When athletes feel competent in what they do, they are

more motivated to persist and achieve. The second is control. Athletes also show higher levels of motivation when they feel in control of their sport and that they do it for themselves and not for parents or coaches. Athletes who feel in control are more likely to take ownership of both successes and failures. The third is feeling connected. Research has shown that athletes display higher levels of motivation when they feel connected to their coaches. When they perceive genuine caring and belief, they are more able to push past obstacles and limitations.

You create the motivational climate in your gym. Continue to model the mindset you would like to see in your athletes. Remember, they are looking to you for guidance and example. Your lack of motivation will cultivate a motivational lull throughout your entire team. ✖

References

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