

# Developing Internally Motivated Athletes

By Jason Selk

**Jason is a Licensed Psychotherapist and Professional Sports Psychology Consultant. He's also the Head Men's Coach at St. Louis Gymnastics Center.**

Imagine how enjoyable it would be to come to the gym everyday and work with individuals who never missed practice and trained as hard and efficiently as possible. Every correction and assignment you give them they carry out in full. Rarely would you ever make a correction or have to teach the technical execution of a skill twice, and when you did it was only because the athlete did not hear you the first time. Wow, would life be grand. This is what it would be like to have a team of ultra-internally motivated athletes.

Most coaches already know there are two types of motivation; internal and external. However, do coaches know that it is the way they administer external motivation that determines the development of internally motivated athletes? Many coaches believe their athletes should be at least as internally motivated as they are, without realizing their responsibility to teach or develop internal motivation. Research suggests that individuals are born with the potential for internal motivation; however, without the proper encouragement the potential will not be fully achieved.

It is important to understand both external and internal motivation before trying to teach athletes to become internally motivated. Research identified internally motivated athletes as possessing the following three attributes:

1. They believe they are good at their sport.
2. They have fun while training and competing in their sport.
3. They use goals.



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The potential for an athlete to believe they are good at what they are doing, having fun in training and competition, and using goals is largely dependent upon the type of external motivation used by the coach. There are two basic types of external motivation--aversive control and positive control. Aversive control is using punishment or the threat of punishment to motivate individuals to behave a certain way. Positive control emphasizes the rewards or the promise of rewards to motivate

behavior change. For example, a coach using aversive control may tell a gymnast he/she will do 25 push-ups if he/she does not do the giant swing with straight legs. Whereas the coach using positive control would promise the athlete five minutes of free time if he/she does the giant swing with straight legs.

Researchers have identified positive control as the most effective method of producing positive achievement affect and positive social comparisons which are essentially the variables that contribute to athlete's perception that he/she is good at his/her sport. Additionally the use of rewards or promise of rewards is conducive to creating a fun environment for training. For example, it is much more fun for a gymnast to strive for the learning of a new skill when the coach has made it into a game with potential for rewards rather than learning the new skill to avoid punishment.

Aversive control can be an effective motivational strategy if used correctly. As many coaches know, using punishment or the threat of punishment can push an athlete to try harder and even make new skills or refine existing skills. The problem with aversive control is that it has a long-term negative affect on the development of an athlete's self-esteem and can also damage the coach-athlete relationship. For these two reasons, aversive control in most literature is said to be something to avoid. However, the latest research is providing the coaching community with guidelines of how to use positive control and aversive control together to produce the most internally motivated athletes.

## Guidelines for Administering External Motivation

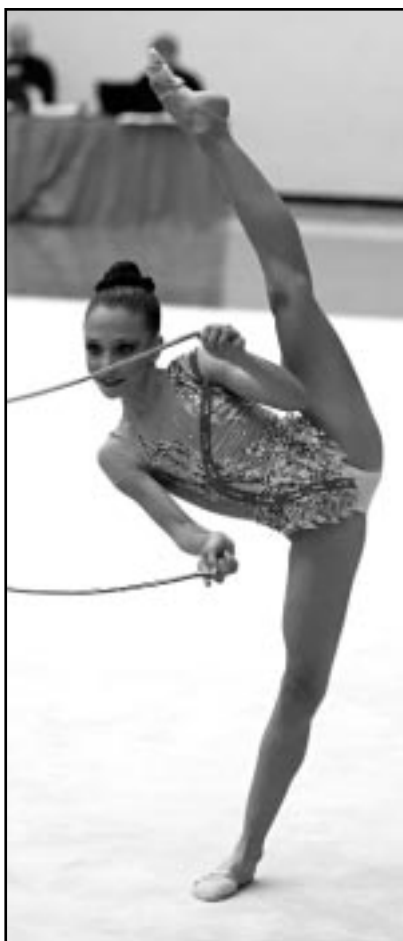
- 1 Create a training climate of fun and achievement.
  - Set up training programs that are centered around competition games and rewards. Be as innovative as possible when coming up with new competition games in practice that help achieve preset training goals. For example, place a new skills chart on the wall in the gym showing that each athlete has 2 new skills on each event to learn. Every time an athlete learns a new skill, his/her team gets a point; the winning team receives a desirable prize at the end of the competition.
  - Use a positive coaching technique that emphasizes the following: when an athlete performs a skill, say a specific positive comment on what they did well, give a suggestion of how to improve it next time, then give a general positive comment about what they did well. For instance, I really like how you kept your legs straight on the giant; next time I would like for you to try to keep your head in; all in all that looks really good. This contributes to the athlete's perception that they are good at what they are doing and motivates the athlete to make the specific correction for future success.

- Use daily, weekly, and monthly practice and competition goals to give strategic direction and motivation to training and competition. If unsure of how to do this, consult with a Sport Psychology Consultant or a publication of how to set effective goals.

**2** Create an effective balance of positive control and aversive control. The recommendation is to apply 85% positive control and 15% aversive control. Use positive control whenever possible and reserve using aversive control for times when athletes are not giving 100% effort. Use rewards or competition games (positive control) for times when athletes are trying to learn new skills or improve existing skills. Use aversive control when athletes are not following gym or team rules. For example, if an athlete continues to miss turns because he/she is goofing around, then it is appropriate to use discipline (sitting out for 10 minutes) with the athlete.

**3** Communicate behavioral expectations and subsequent rewards and consequences. Let each athlete know in advance what behaviors are expected from them and let them know what will happen when they do or do not meet those expectations. Creating a reward and consequence protocol is an effective method of letting athletes know what to expect. For example, a coach may instruct the team that for every new skill learned during practice, the entire team receives five minutes of free time (reward protocol). The coach may also let the team know that missing a turn will result in a warning for the first offense, sitting out 10 minutes for the second offense, and going home from practice early for a third offense (consequence protocol).

**4** Athlete and coach must have congruent evaluations of effort based on behavioral definitions. It is essential that both the



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coach and athlete agree on whether or not the behavioral expectations are being met. For example, an athlete who is sent home for goofing around will not learn from the experience unless the athlete believes he/she was goofing around. Never take for granted that your athletes know what you expect unless you have behaviorally defined it for them. Behavioral definitions are concrete, measurable definitions created for abstract terms. For instance, a behavioral definition for effort may be 80% attendance, no more than 10 seconds pass without someone taking a turn, and an athlete always does at least 5 skills in a turn.

**5** No anger yelling or humiliating. It is important for athletes to feel safe and liked in the training environment. One sure way to undermine this is to get angry with or humiliate (especially amateur) athletes. Coaches can exercise discipline without anger yelling or humiliating and still achieve the goal of motivating athletes to change behaviors. The consequence protocol really helps control the negative energy in the gym but yelling and humiliating reintroduces it very quickly. Try to remember to stay calm and coach/teach what you would like to see happen next time rather than getting mad about what just happened. Prearranged consequences will be far more effective than making an athlete feel unsafe or disliked.



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