Increasing Athletes' *POWER* to Solve Problems

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INTRODUCTION

•As a response to the increasing number of young elite athletes who withdraw from sport competition, a study was conducted that evaluated the effectiveness of a social problem-solving (SPS) program specifically designed to help young tennis players deal with stress.

•SPS is a process in which an individual attempts to brainstorm a variety of potential solutions to a problem or stressor that he or she encounters in daily life. Young athletes can apply this coping strategy to address difficult and recurring situations that occur in competitive athletics as well as other problems that typically arise outside of sport.

PURPOSE

- The purpose of this project was to develop, carry out and measure the effectiveness of a social problem-solving (SPS) program titled the *POWER Problem Solving Curriculum*. The ***POWER*** module included the following steps:

- **P**roblem identification
- **O**ption generation
- **W**eighing consequences
- **E**nacting a plan
- **R**eflecting and **R**ecycling

The project was conducted over three phases.

- The first phase investigated the relationship between certain health markers (e.g., injury, emotional health, and nutritional health) and SPS using a sample of 173 male and female Western Section players [the majority were 12 and 13 years old (69%)].

- The second phase used the data from the first phase to create the POWER program that was later implemented and assessed in the third phase with 139 male and female tennis players enrolled in the Western Section player development program (ages 10 to 14 years).

YEAR PERFORMED 1998

RESULTS

Phase One Results:

- -The greatest health risks for players were in the area for emotional health (66.2%).
- -About one of four players reported that it was very hard to deal with stressful situations in general, and specifically in stressful tennis situations.
- -One of every five players indicated they felt they had nothing to look forward to during the past month, and 13% reported wanting to quit playing tennis during the last season.
- -Players who had higher social problem-solving (SPS) scores also reported better use of various health behaviors.

Phase Two Results:

- -Overall, players scored high in their belief that SPS was important.
- -On the other hand, players scored low on the SPS skills of *Problem identification*, *Option generation*, *Weighing consequences*, and *Enacting a plan*.
- -These results were used to develop the curriculum for the training program for phase three.

Phase Three Results:

- -Players who completed the *POWER* Problem-Solving Curriculum significantly increased their SPS skills.
- -More specifically, improvement was observed in *Problem identification*, *Weighing consequences*, *Enacting a plan*, and *Reflecting and Recycling*

COACHING IMPLICATIONS

- It appears that the players were able and willing to use the social problem-solving (SPS) skills provided in the *POWER* training program.
- The most effective problem solvers learn to either focus on the next most positive aspect of the situation or use the *POWER* model to reduce unpleasant emotional responses to a conflict.
- The six-module *POWER* program addressed deficiencies in SPS skills that would limit the use of effective coping strategies.
- The program seemed especially useful for addressing emotional health concerns (e.g., tennis related and general stress) and injury prevention issues that were often though to be out of players' control.
- The first step of the *POWER* program, *Problem Identification*, or correctly identifying the source of stress as a problem, is critical to the total SPS process.
- In some cases, stress is reduced by correctly labeling the original source of conflict as not being a problem because it has no meaningful outcome or major disruption for the player.
- Learning to take a different perspective or be an active listener (through the *Option generation* step) prompted more creative potential solutions to typical daily hassles.
- Once players brainstorm creative options, being able to *Weigh or predict outcomes* of potential solutions (the third step of the program) may reduce wasted time and energy used to pursue unrealistic or negative coping strategies, especially health-compromising behaviors such as trying to ignore stress.
- The *Engage in a plan* component of the *POWER* model teaches athletes to use a series of realistic questions such as "who, what, when, where and how" to plan and implement potential solutions.
- Players who systematically *Reflect and Recycle* through the coping process are better able to evaluate the progress of their coping plan by returning to the initial steps of the *POWER* model.
- Finally, the study concluded that USTA player development coaches could successfully implement a SPS curriculum during regularly scheduled training meetings.
- For SPS to be most useful for players, however, the coaches who teach the strategies must believe SPS is beneficial in helping young players deal with stress both inside and outside of the tennis environment.

REFERENCES / RESOURCES

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