THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF MENTAL TRAINING IN BASKETBALL

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Abstract
In basketball, training is a difficult activity realised by the coach and sportsmen over a long period of time and through which a multilateral preparation is ensured for the sportsmen in order to successfully participate in competitions. Training is a very complex pedagogical process which consists of both the instructive side, but also the preparation and education of players. The purpose of training is to ensure the multilateral preparation and evolution of sportsmen, from a physical point of view, as well as from a psychic point of view and to prepare them for sports events.

Practising mental training can have an educative effect on the basketball players, by enhancing the level of awareness of doing an activity, by disciplining the thought process and by raising the capacity of concentration all of which bring forth the development of self-determination and the consciousness of doing his own activity.

Keywords: basketball, mental training, psychological preparation

JEL classification: 110, 119

Introduction
In basketball, training is a difficult activity realised by the coach and sportsmen over a long period of time and through which a multilateral preparation is ensured for the sportsmen in order to successfully participate in competitions. “Training is a very complex pedagogical process which consists of both the instructive side, but also the preparation and education of players” (Tudos, 2000). The purpose of training is to ensure the multilateral preparation and evolution of sportsmen, from a physical point of view, as well as from a psychic point of view and to prepare them for sports events.

“In Training, we will talk about the formation of prowess and motor skills in the practiced sport” (Holdevici, 2013), in other words: the technical-tactical preparation.

Preparation is about increasing the body's work capacity during the sporting activity, namely physical preparation.

Education is the sum of all measures related to the development of psychic skills, of specific individual psychic characteristics, the formation of moral awareness and behaviour, in other words, psychological preparation.

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An essential element for both the professional players’ training and for their coaches is the psychological preparation. This element will enable the players to perform at their peak capacity and it will also help the coach to reach the full potential of his players. Moreover, it will stop the players from capping, losing their motivation or even giving up on the sport. In professional basketball, all players have approximately reached the same level of physical, technical and tactical preparation. That is the reason why the difference between a mid-level and an elite player is the mental aspect. It is of the essence to have a training schedule through which sportsmen will learn to be stronger and develop the mental strength, needed both on the field and in life in general.

The development of a basketball player’s psychic system

“The psyche properly captures the conditions of the prevailing activity a man does” (Tudos, 2000). In other words, the workout done during training and the participation in competitions represent the basic activity of a sportsman. It is a fact that both these activities strongly affect the sportsman’s psyche. The practice’s influences manifest themselves through developing and perfecting some psychic processes, but also by forming some positive aspects of character.

The spatial perceptions of movement, time, orientation and the body’s balance are constantly influenced and perfected by the exercises used in basketball. The systematic activity in practice and competitions leads to developing specific skills, which in basketball are known as “the sense of the ball”. Alongside this “sense of the ball”, the observation skills are developed and expressed both through observing the spatial, time and force characteristics of the external movements and the features of their execution, but also by observing your very own subjective state. Only by correctly observing the external movements and your own state and moves, judging and differentiating them with precision will the basketball player be able to execute especially complex motor acts, with a high degree of coordination and adjustment to the intended targets.

Through practice, the players’ representations are also educated and developed according to previous perceptions. The progressive enrichment of the motor experience and the knowledge about exercises refines the representations and therefore, the capacity of evoking them and realise the images the sportsman needs when he is mentally practicing the exercise. Besides representations, imagination and motor memory are developed. They are both very important for the basketball game because they are the basis of creating different combinations of exercises that are much appreciated, the more they contain various, new and high-level difficulty elements.

Reasoning has a very important role, not only in basketball but also in all sports. This is the element that directs the entire behaviour according to the target, tasks, and means of the activity. Developing reasoning can be done by increasing the role of mental operations in the process of forming notions, by acquiring and
understanding knowledge, but also by perfecting the quality of the players’ reasoning (efficiency, profoundness, speed). The entire tactical behaviour is based on the quality of the players’ reasoning, trained through practice.

Practice for basketball can also have effects when it comes to educating character. The game cultivates the collective spirit and at the same time, the desire for victory, continuous performance, and team spirit. The player is moved by optimism, the desire to win and thus, he develops the habit of constantly working to attain the intended target. The correct attitude towards the adversary, as well as the correct attitude towards the rules of conduct, the rules of competition and the referees’ decisions can only be formed during training.

The mental practice has been imposed in last decades as a complementary and extremely valuable means of the players’ technical-tactical preparation. The practice of such training is justifiable because:

- any means that can bring even a small progress in practice and performance must be used;
- it is an effortless continuation of the practical training, but it is also an addition;
- in certain situations, like accidents, long trips, breaks from the practical training, the mental practice can replace the practical training and achieve very good results.

An important rule of training is to make sportsmen realise very exact motor representations. They need to have clear representations of the movements they need to execute and especially be capable of realizing them. Players form a general representation about a certain movement, but also a work representation, based on what they feel and how they envision their very own execution. This work representation depends on many factors and conditions, such as:

- the evolution level of the body and kinesthesia scheme;
- the perceptive experience as a result of recording the coach’s demonstration, the colleagues’ movement, on the field or on TV;
- one’s perceptive experience as a result of trial moves and various practices;
- the communicative capacity, of expressing through words – if possible in specialized or symbolic language – these movements.

The representations of movements are also called ideomotor representations, in other words, representations which trigger movement. Mental or ideomotor practice is the process of maintaining and consolidating the movements’ and actions’ representations, whose result is the activation of neuro-muscular formations and thus, the growth of the workout’s efficiency. In practice, mental training is used especially by alternating it with the actual training, because it deals with mutual influence and control.

In basketball, the players “mentally practice” different technical-tactical methods. Take, for example, the free throws. In order to enhance the precision of
the throws one will:

- physically train to strengthen the arm’s and leg’s muscles;
- technically train to learn the movement’s representation;
- mentally train in order to improve the precision of free throws. One visualises the sequences which made up the movement of throwing, therefore one can see, exercise and revise the correct mental programme of the movement. After mentally envisioning the correct movement, it can be easily and quickly applied into practice.
- in order to maintain the precision of free throws in official games, when the emotional impact can be very strong, one can use concentration techniques and emotion management.

Players should reserve 10 minutes of “meditation” in which they think about how they are going to behave on the field, with their adversaries and during probable situations before every game. Besides this use, of learning, consolidating and perfecting, mental practice is efficient in situations during which sportsmen could not realise the practical training, because of injuries and incapacities, while being sick or during long trips. In all these situations mental practice is a replacement of real training. Mental practice complements practical training.

The plan – a model of mental practice

The first stage: The formation of movement representations

The coach:

- Demonstrates and explains the movements (the motor technique of gestures) and their spatial, temporal and energetic characteristics.
- Uses other intuitive and verbal means in order to clarify the movement’s representations: photos, pictograms, films, video recordings, schemes, indications, recommendations.
- Guides the concrete activity of the players.
- Guides the mental activity of players in all the stages of the training.

The player:

- Carefully listens (but not tense), the coach’s demonstrations and presentation.
- Verbally reproduces the indications for the movement.
- Tries to move according to the “model” and indications.
- Verbally reports what he wanted to do, what he expected and actually succeeded.
- Does and repeats movements and actions which can help – through transfer – learning the targeted motor gestures.
- Actually exercising the motor gestures. He permanently analyses the level of execution and tells the coach the changes and the progress realized.
• Fills in the information about the movements that he is learning, by systematically observing the movements of other players who are advanced or more effective.
• Reports about what he observed in particular about these moves, what is useful for his own activity.
• Compares himself with his colleagues.

The second stage: Educating the capacity of concentrating on their own representations

The player:
• Learns to carefully observe (study) photos and pictograms of the motor gestures’ movement – of other people or his very own – by progressively analysing in various stages of the motor action, the stages of the movement or the body segments in movement.
• The observation of the same images is extensively repeated, at one-day intervals, 5-10 minutes every time, until the player can value the knowledge of the movement’s every detail, by clearly imagining the entire movement and its characteristics.
• The check-up can be done by reporting the movement’s characteristics to the coach, who constantly follows the evolution of his student. Then one can move on to the next step: another player’s movement or the same movement done in a different context.
• The player learns to precisely represent the movements he is going to do during training; he will be given 10-20 seconds to concentrate on the targeted movement’s image.
• After realising the movement, the player needs to mentally represent (revise) what and how he did the movement, only after that will he report to the coach and receive the coach’s assessment.
• When he arrives home, relaxed and partially recovered, the sportsman replays the movement considered to be the best one from training during the day for 3-5 times and then he aims to repeat this movement the next day.

If the player has difficulties concentrating on the images or on other players’ and his movement, he will be given limited tasks for observing and reporting (just a moment from the movement, just a segment etc.) Then a step-by-step individual tempo will be used until the player will achieve total observation capacity.
The third step: The proper mental practice

It is realised by sportsmen who have correctly learnt the movements through a 5-10 minute session at first, then after acquiring the ability to control the representations through a 10-12 minute session. It is done when the player is calm and relaxed. The player images his own movement with the optimal form and characteristics like during the game, maintaining a lively “work” image. If other images interfere with the concentration (audience, coach, opponent etc.) he should say “stop” and mentally start over the targeted movement. If the player becomes anxious or nervous, he should stop, relax and come back when he thinks he can concentrate. It is recommended to aerate the room before and after the mental practice session while avoiding or annihilating the disruptive stimuli. The player should have and write his own observations about the subjective states and the effects of every training session in a self-control diary and discuss them with the coach.

Conclusions

To sum up, in order to do mental practice it is imperative for the player to have a satisfactory level of acquiring the movements and technical-tactical actions. Practising mental training can have an educative effect on the basketball players, by enhancing the level of awareness of doing an activity, by disciplining the thought process and by raising the capacity of concentration all of which bring forth the development of self-determination and the consciousness of doing his own activity.

An important element in the players’ mental training is identifying the mental state with which the sportsman can perform at his best. The mental practice focuses on a new way of thinking through which the mind learns how to remove mental barriers which affect the player’s performance. This mental training prepares basketball players to control their thoughts, emotions, and in the end their performance. The mental practice helps players cope with stress and make better decisions on the field and in everyday life.

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