



CONSULTING WITH COMPETITIVE ATHLETES

I have worked with athletes from many different sports representations. I've worked with amateur and national competitor figure skaters, gymnasts, tennis players, track and field contestants, amateur and professional hockey players, Olympic skiers, equestrians, golfers, football players, swimmers and divers. The pressure and stress that comes with any competitive sport can result in the undoing of whatever technical ability and even longevity of experience that an athlete might possess. The pressure and stress of competition interferes with the mental and emotional controls necessary in order to compete satisfactorily. It can create an aura that makes the athlete lose track of the "game plan" that needs to be upheld in order to compete ... in order to win.

The problem is the same for every competitive sport whether an individual sport such as tennis or figure skating or team sports such as hockey, baseball or football. The factors interfering in an athlete's performance is the same in all of them. If a competitor cannot control the manner in which they THINK, FEEL and ACT on the field of competition, *something must suffer*. Essentially, the need to *focus is a universal "given" in all sports*. Without focus, all of the technical and practice training is for naught. When I watch a sport, I watch competitors' eyes which tell me how capable they are in maintaining focus in order to execute plays. In this way a prediction can be made of the outcome. Of course, this method is not accurate 100% of the time but it gives a sense of the *feel of an athlete's performance, thinking processes and focus ability*. There's a sense that can be viewed through the athlete's body language that will tell the story.

In my work with athletes I go into several different aspects of what I call the Mental Side of their game. Their anxiety and fears around the possibility of their being “benched” resulting in problems focusing, the effects of their plight on their families, doubting their abilities, having lost the joy of playing their sport, of having lost their “feel for the game”, thinking about what they were doing too much vs. their instinctive play ... all of these are just some of the issues that are discussed. I train them to use deep relaxation and visualization of what they hope to accomplish before every practice and game. I also recommend using some of the same techniques after games or practices so that their relationships with their families will not be affected by negative influences. I work with them both as a group while some players are seen individually over a period of time determined as a result of preliminary assessments. Overall, my observations showed that there is a significant improvement in their attitudes, play and general performance which is usually substantiated by their Coach.

SOME EXAMPLES OF WORKING WITH THE MENTAL SIDE OF SPORTS

EQUESTRIAN

An equestrian approached me after having spent a great deal of money on technical training lessons to improve her riding because she was not placing well in competitions. Upon talking with her and getting a history, it was clear that her expectations of herself were creating considerable anxiety which she was transferring to her horse resulting in disruptions in what otherwise needed to be a natural flow of movement in order to perform with excellence. After several sessions with her around teaching her how to use relaxation techniques designed just for her, in ten competitions, she placed first in seven and second in three of them. She had attained her goal.

COMPETITIVE GOLFER

A competitive golfer came to me after spending considerable time taking lessons for a problem she was having with her putter in her inability to improve that part of her game. The problem was assessed by her professional coach as being in her grip resulting in buying new clubs, new grips and changing her putting grip. I asked her to shake my hand and her grip was very firm...much like a man's. I chastised her and said that she needed to be more “lady-like” and gentle. Naturally, she was insulted but I needed to get her attention because she was still on the track of needing more lessons and equipment. In talking with her I sensed that she enjoyed

taking risks and was a bit of a “daredevil” as well as someone who needed to be in control all of the time.

Once her attention was gained, I told her that I wanted her to give me a putting lesson on her home course. She thought this to be strange but complied because she was curious as to what to expect and, certainly, she wasn't going to let me “win”. In the lesson, she worked with my stance, head position, “reading” the green and, finally, my grip. I intentionally gripped the putter with a “death grip”. I told her that this grip always tended to insure that I was going to succeed. She asked me to loosen it but I continued to ease up just a bit each time. She ended by chastising me indicating that I wasn't receptive to a necessary change. Clearly, she was very frustrated with me. I said that I was frustrated as well and asked that she show me how to do it. I set up five golf balls at different locations and distances from the cup and told her that I would watch while she stroked each of them into the cup.

She started off gripping her club tightly as she usually did but, because she knew that I was watching intently and wouldn't be put into a position of losing control, she began to relax so that by the fifth ball her grip, stroke, etc. was very relaxed. By the way, she missed three of the first five puts but interestingly holed the last two balls as her grip became naturally relaxed. She gave a big grin when she finished and said, begrudgingly, “OK, I get the message”. We did some more work in the office around the use of relaxation techniques previous to her putting. Later on in the season, she wrote me a note of thanks indicating that she will always remember me (*she didn't say in what way!*) and that the techniques I taught her worked consistently.

NHL GOALIE

I was fortunate to have been able to work with a group of players from the Buffalo Sabres NHL hockey team while Scott Bowman was the Coach and General Manager. This group was identified as not performing according to what their capabilities were and were in danger of either being benched or traded from the team. The team was just weeks away from the beginning of the playoffs and it was vital that all of the players be playing at their peak in order to compete for the Stanley Cup.

I worked with both the group as well as some of the players on an individual basis. In many of the cases, players were experiencing some difficulties in

the personal areas of their lives which were being carried over and interfering with their athletic performances. I call this the “**the carryover effect**”. This has to do with thoughts and emotions associated with athletes’ personal lives that interfere with their performance in their sport. This is one of the most difficult issues to identify and correct but once addressed and resolved, the effects are almost immediately noticeable.

One of the characteristics determined to be occurring for all members was their loss of passion for playing the game. In one of our sessions, I had them all go into a deep relaxed state where I asked that they visualize themselves going back to their childhoods when they played “pond hockey” for fun. At a certain point, I asked that they move out of their relaxed state to discuss their impressions. All of the athletes did so but one ... the goalie. The rest of the group moved into discussion and after about five minutes, the goalie opened his eyes, looked around the room and announced “That’s good stuff, man!” There was a noticeable improvement in all of the players’ performances but most especially the goalie’s ability to focus and make saves.

FOOTBALL

I was able to present an interactive workshop to a group of football players training at the **Optimun Performance Training Institute** were about to go through what is called a “combine”. A combine is the final step that players go through in order to determine whether they are going into the NFL Draft. They must undergo psychological testing, performance testing and being interviewed by professional coaches in order to make the final determination.

Previous to giving the workshop I made it a point to watch their training under the tutelage of Coach Richard Lansky, himself a former Olympic weightlifter. The training was extremely rigorous and exhausting as the players were pushed to their absolute limits with every set of exercises. There were infrequent breaks with the emphasis placed on endurance. There was some competition among the players as they went through their routines which made it enjoyable enabling a sense of humor to be experienced.

The stress and anxiety of their going through the combine experience to which they were about to be exposed was intense. There would be no second chance and, indeed, they would be expected to perform at their optimum

level in order to be considered for the NFL Draft. In the workshop, I brought out the elements contained in competition with the main emphasis of their developing and maintaining focus in order to stay in their mind zones so that they might compete to their fullest capacity. The training included three deep relaxation exercises including visualization and imagery of actual playing and/or testing conditions so that they might be able to imagine what their experience would be.

Throughout the workshop, the players were asked to participate by voicing their experiences and opinions with respect to all of the material that was presented in order to “tailor make” their workshop experience. They were very responsive and involved in their realization of the importance of their training their minds and emotions in order to more greatly insure their success in the combine experience as well as their future in the NFL should they be drafted. Their rigorous physical training combined with the mental/emotional training to which I exposed them would hopefully complete their cycle of performing at their optimum levels.

A Brief Biographical Sketch

After an over 40 year career as a professional psychotherapist and Director of The Sports Stress Clinic in Amherst, NY, Charles Bonasera came to Florida and decided to use the benefits of his previous professional experiences in his new roles of Consultant in Life Management and Business Coaching as well as his expertise as a Motivational Speaker. He once again became involved with athletes in different sports training them with his techniques to help them develop and maintain focus as well as staying in their zone. Much of his training methods are derived from the CD collection he developed under the heading of WIN-WIN SECRETS as the President of Personal Identity Controls. This collection consists of thirty-six programs dealing with vital issues in the management of stress.

Another role that he adopted to add to his professional career was that of Author. Early in the 1980's he wrote Guide to a Life Management Process which he has re-written as a workbook to successfully help people manage their stress which includes his own Working Model. As a result in his interest in golf and realizing that it was essentially a “mind game”, he wrote The Mental Side of Golf which can benefit the beginner as well as professionals playing the game of golf.

He then compiled over five-hundred sayings that he had developed in the course of his professional career as stimuli to help people change patterns in their lives entitled How to Stay Well and Live Life to the Fullest. This was followed by a book documenting case studies around disruptive life patterns including ways to change them under the name of How in the Hell Did This Happen to Me? Both his personal involvement in

sports as a participant, coach, manager and in his role in officiating, inspired him to write a primer for parents and coaches entitled The Legend of Little League.

Charles invites you to view his website at www.charlesmbonasera.com as well as to write with your comments and questions to his e-mail address (charles@charlesmbonasera.com). He would also be very happy to communicate with his readers by telephone should they desire. His professional motto is “seeking alternative methods to happiness” and wishes those touched by his words to practice the three secrets to a happy life: “enjoy life and enjoy it thoroughly ... develop and maintain a sense of humor ... bring as much love into your life as possible.