

Methodology for Using Relaxation and Visualization Methods to Reduce Pre-Competition Stress

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Abstract: This article provides a detailed description of the methods of using relaxation and visualization techniques to reduce pre-competition stress in athletes, ensure mental stability, and increase self-confidence. Factors such as anxiety, excitement, and mental pressure, which are common in sports practice, distract the athlete's attention, lead to excessive muscle tension, and reduce performance in the competition. Therefore, relaxation exercises - deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic exercises - are presented as effective tools for calming the athlete's nervous system, normalizing the heart rate, and relaxing the muscles. Visualization techniques, on the other hand, enhance mental preparation by positively embodying the competition process in the athlete's mind, imagining successful actions, and repeatedly practicing the ideal game situation in the mind. It is argued that these methodological approaches together are important for significantly reducing pre-competition stress in athletes, increasing their willpower, motivation, and psychological stability in competition activities.

Keywords: pre-competition stress, relaxation, visualization, methodology, treatment.

Introduction. In sports activities, especially during the preparation for competitions, athletes experience various psychological experiences. Among the main causes of stress that occurs before the competition, psychological pressure, the intensity of the competitive environment, fear of failure, and a sense of responsibility to spectators and coaches occupy a special place. These factors disrupt the athlete's internal psychological balance and directly affect his confidence and performance in the competition.

Stress leads to a number of negative consequences for the athlete. First of all, there is a decrease in attention and a decrease in the speed of decision-making. As a result of excessive muscle tension, it becomes difficult to perform technical movements accurately and coordinated. In addition, as a result of mental stress, the athlete's emotional state becomes unstable, which can lead to the choice of incorrect tactics, a feeling of fear, and lack of confidence in their own abilities. These situations lead to a decrease in the result of the competition.

Modern sports psychology is developing effective methods to combat these problems. Among them, relaxation and visualization methods are the most widely used and scientifically proven tools. Relaxation methods allow an athlete to relax his muscular and nervous system, reduce mental pressure, and control stress. Visualization, on the other hand, strengthens the athlete's psychological preparation by mentally imagining the competition process and visualizing successful actions.

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to fully reveal the methodology of relaxation and visualization exercises aimed at reducing stress in athletes before the competition on a scientific

basis, to highlight the procedure and advantages of their use. These methodological recommendations are of great practical importance in increasing the psychological stability of athletes and fully preparing them for the competition mentally and physically.

Relaxation methods methodology.

Relaxation methods are one of the most effective methods for normalizing the mental and physical state of an athlete before the competition. Their main task is to calm the athlete's central nervous system, reduce excessive muscle tension, and alleviate psychophysiological disorders caused by stress. Below are three basic relaxation techniques that are widely used in sports practice.

Breathing exercises.

Breathing exercises provide general relaxation by reducing nervousness in athletes, balancing the respiratory and cardiovascular systems, and enriching the body with oxygen. Such exercises are effective in pre-competition stress, especially when there is a rapid heartbeat, fear, and increased excitement. When performing the exercise, the athlete should be in a correct sitting or lying position. First, a deep breath is taken through the nose, and this process lasts four seconds. After that, the breath is held for two seconds. Then it is exhaled slowly and evenly through the mouth, for about six to eight seconds. In this order, 8 to 10 breathing cycles are performed. As a result of the exercises, the athlete feels lightness, peace, and inner balance.

Progressive muscle relaxation (Jacobson method).

This method, developed by American psychologist Edmund Jacobson, is used to reduce excessive muscle tension in athletes. Because during strong excitement, the muscles automatically tense, and this negatively affects the quality of the athlete's technical movements. The essence of the exercise is that the athlete, lying down, closes his eyes and focuses all his attention on the activity of the muscles. First, the arm muscles, then the leg, neck and face muscles are tensely tense for five to seven seconds in turn. After that, the muscles are slowly relaxed, and this state lasts 10 to 12 seconds. The exercise is carried out for 10 to 15 minutes. This method allows the athlete to feel the difference between muscle tension and relaxation, which ultimately helps to control the muscles and eliminate unnecessary tension even during the competition.

Autogenic exercises.

Autogenic exercises are widespread in sports psychology and are one of the effective methods that ensure that the athlete achieves mental stability through self-influence. During the exercise, the athlete, sitting or lying down in a calm environment, closes his eyes and repeats certain phrases in his mind. For example, positive formulas such as "I am calm", "My body is light", "My muscles are relaxed", "I believe in myself" are used. These exercises affect the athlete's subconscious, reduce the level of excitement, and increase self-confidence. The exercise is usually performed for 10 minutes. As a result, the athlete feels light and refreshed, and is mentally prepared for the competition.

Visualization methods methodology.

Visualization methods are one of the effective methods used in sports psychology to prepare athletes for competitions, and its main essence is to positively imagine the upcoming competition process, their actions and the resulting success in the athlete's mind in advance. This method increases the athlete's mental stability, reduces the level of stress and excitement, and increases self-confidence. Visualization exercises should be performed mainly in a calm environment, in a state where the athlete can concentrate without distraction. It is carried out in the following forms.

Imagining the competition process.

In this exercise, the athlete closes his eyes and feels himself directly on the competition field. He recreates in his mind the stage from entering the field to the referee's whistle. At the next stage, he imagines in detail the actions of his opponent, his counterattacks, his own responses, defensive and offensive actions. In this process, the athlete feels calm, confident and successful. During visualization, the athlete should strive to embody each episode as clearly and realistically as possible: the sounds of the field, the screams of the audience, the referee's signal, the opponent's actions, and most importantly, his own successful actions. This exercise pre-adapts the athlete to the conditions of the competition and helps him to more easily perceive the psychological pressure in a real situation.

Visualization of "successful actions".

The focus of this method is on the athlete's individual technical actions. For example, a basketball player imagines himself accurately throwing the ball into the basket, a football player scores a goal with a kick, or a wrestler defeats his opponent with an effective technical method. The main focus is on the athlete's strengths. Each successful action forms positive feelings in the athlete's psyche, such as "I am capable", "I can do it". Thus, the athlete's self-confidence increases, and the stress level decreases. If this visualization exercise is repeated regularly, the athlete's automatic reactions and confident actions will manifest themselves during the competition.

"Ideal game" visualization.

This method allows the athlete to imagine the entire competition from beginning to end with a positive outcome in his mind. The athlete imagines himself performing positive and effective actions at every stage of the competition from the first minute to the final result. He feels confident when entering the field, makes the right decision in each technical and tactical situation, effectively responds to the opponent's actions. Most importantly, he mentally imagines that at the end of the competition he is winning, that his team or he is succeeding. This exercise strengthens the athlete's willpower, increases the desire for victory, and helps maintain a positive mood during the competition.

In order to effectively use relaxation and visualization exercises in the application of a methodological approach, it is necessary to introduce them into the training and competition process of athletes based on a certain order and regime. This approach systematically forms the athlete's psychological preparation and helps reduce pre-competition stress.

It is important for athletes to regularly conduct mental training exercises. Therefore, it is recommended to include 15–20 minutes of relaxation exercises in the main physical training two or three times a week. If these exercises are performed after or at the end of the main part of the training, the athlete's fatigue level decreases, the muscles relax and the nervous system calms down. After this, visualization exercises are performed for 5–7 minutes. In this case, the athlete mentally re-enacts the technical movements performed during the training or imagines successful movements in a future competition. Thus, the athlete receives the maximum benefit from the training not only physically, but also psychologically.

On the day of the competition, it is natural for the athlete to be under strong excitement, anxiety and psychological pressure. In such a situation, relaxation and visualization exercises play an important role. About an hour before the competition, the athlete is recommended to perform relaxation exercises for 10 minutes. In this case, the body is calmed and muscle tension is reduced using deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation or autogenic exercises. After that, a 5-7 minute visualization exercise is performed. During this process, the athlete imagines himself on the competition field, the referee's whistle, the opponent's actions and his successful episodes. As a result, the athlete's mental state stabilizes, self-confidence increases and he enters the competition in a positive mood.

Before the start of the competition, the athlete may experience short-term excitement and fear. Therefore, it is advisable to perform short relaxation exercises that are performed quickly in the preparation room. In this case, the athlete performs a cycle of deep breathing and exhalation 3-4 times. This simple exercise normalizes the heart rate, reduces nervous tension and focuses the athlete's attention on the competition.

The advantages of the methodology are that the importance of relaxation and visualization techniques for athletes is very great, and their regular use allows them to achieve high results during the competition. This methodology has a number of advantages.

Firstly, relaxation and visualization exercises provide mental stability to the athlete. Before the competition, the athlete's mood, emotions and internal balance can be disturbed. With the help of these methods, the athlete learns to control his emotions and remains calm during the competition.

Secondly, these methods reduce the athlete's level of anxiety and stress. Deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and autogenic exercises calm the athlete's nervous system, eliminate muscle tension. As a result, the athlete enters the competition in a relaxed mood and negative emotions do not affect his actions.

Thirdly, relaxation and visualization techniques make it easier for the athlete to make quick decisions during the competition. Reducing stress and anxiety allows him to concentrate, quickly assess the situation and choose the right tactics. This increases the athlete's effectiveness in the competition.

Fourthly, these methods strengthen the athlete's self-confidence. During visualization exercises, the athlete imagines himself performing successful actions. As a result, he is confident in his abilities even in real competitions, shows initiative and can demonstrate his strong-willed qualities.

Fifthly, the methodology is convenient for the coach. Because relaxation and visualization exercises do not require additional technical equipment or special conditions. They can be performed during training, before the competition or even during the competition. The coach only needs to explain the basic rules of the methodology to the athletes and organize the exercises consistently.

Relaxation and visualization methods help the athlete to psychologically prepare for the competition, manage stress and fully demonstrate his potential.

Conclusion. The conducted analyses show that relaxation and visualization methods are of incomparable importance in the psychological preparation of the athlete for the competition. First of all, these methods ensure the athlete's mental stability, reduce the level of anxiety and excitement, and strengthen self-confidence. Also, during the competition, the ability to concentrate, quickly assess the situation and make the right decision increases. Relaxation and visualization exercises should be used as the most effective methods to enhance the athlete's psychological preparation for the competition. Their effect is reflected not only in the athlete's mental state, but also in his physical activity, helping to successfully implement technical and tactical skills. These exercises should be used not only occasionally, but systematically, including them in weekly and monthly training plans. Regularity forms the athlete's psychological immunity and ensures that he can participate in any competition in a stable mental state. Coaches should gradually teach athletes the relaxation and visualization technique. In this case, it is advisable to start with simple breathing exercises and short visualization tasks, and then move on to more complex exercises and methods of mentally imagining the entire competition process. Such an approach will help athletes gradually master the technique and effectively apply it in practice. Relaxation and visualization exercises should definitely be included in the pre-competition training plan. Each athlete stabilizes himself mentally by performing these exercises for at least 10-15 minutes before entering the competition. This

practice helps the athlete to fully demonstrate his capabilities in the competition and achieve high results. In general, relaxation and visualization techniques should be recognized as one of the simplest, most convenient and effective tools in sports psychology for preparing athletes for the competition. By systematically using them, athletes not only reduce pre-competition stress, but also raise their mental readiness and confidence to a higher level.

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