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A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Anxiety in Athletes

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ABSTRACT

A great deal of the literature on the relationship between anxiety and performance has come from a cognitive-behavioral perspective. This paper examines the relationship between the two constructs from a psychodynamic perspective. Included is a discussion of winning and the anxiety of separation from an object relations perspective, the dread of success, self psychology, Freudian instinct theory, and the secondary gain that is found in defeat. Suggestions for future directions in treatment of anxiety within the athletic context are offered as well as a postscript.

Introduction

From a review of the literature it is clear that the most popular conceptual paradigm in sport psychology is a cognitive-behavioral one. Texts used in undergraduate and graduate courses on sport psychology are slanted heavily toward a behavioral/experimental model of intervention (Murphy, 1995; Horn, 1992). The standard sport psychology interventions include relaxation training, deep breathing, visualization, imagery, mental practice, self-talk and goal-setting. Sport psychology has its roots in academic settings which have traditionally been behavioral in orientation. However, if one works full-time in the field of sport psychology, it becomes clear that cognitive-behavioral techniques will only take you so far. These methods have a hard time with issues such as resistance in the athlete and more subtle effects such as shame, embarrassment and guilt when winning.

This paper will present a review in athletic performance. We will not discuss the areas of resistance and narcissism, two subjects that psychoanalysis is especially suited to explore. However we will cover the various aspects of sports anxiety in athletes.

Symptoms of anxiety as they relate to unconscious conflicts are psychoanalytic ideas. Both the motivation to compete in sports and conflicts about winning are largely unconscious and cognitive-behavioral interventions have little to contribute in the study

of these areas. One of the very few psychoanalytic papers on the psychoanalysis of sports was written by Dan Dervin nearly fifteen years ago. He introduced psychoanalytic thinking to the world of the athlete, (Dervin, 1985). I will extend his introduction and focus on anxiety as a psychoanalyst views it. Criteria for diagnosing anxiety during athletic performance is from the DSM IV. Under the heading of general anxiety disorder are the symptoms of muscle soreness, trembling, restlessness, fatigue, shortness of breath, tachycardia, sweating, dizziness nausea and vomiting, being on edge, startle response, blank mind, poor sleep and irritability. The prevalence of anxiety disorders, simple phobias, obsessive compulsive disorders and post traumatic stress disorders are common in the general population and common in athletes as well.

These symptoms are familiar to many athletes. It is not at all uncommon to hear of sleeplessness, vomiting, nervousness and restlessness before games. The intensity of the anxiety that is felt before and during sports is so gripping, immediate and debilitating that one feels compelled to provide fast relief for these anxious athletes. The need to offer a quick solution to panicking athletes is so pervasive that it may account for the compulsive use of behavioral techniques even when they are ill-advised or ineffective. For the psychologist that works with athletes full-time and over a long period of time ones soon realizes that these quick fixes are often not fixes at all and at best last for very brief periods. Let us explore some psychoanalytic approaches to performance anxiety in sports.

Winning and the Anxiety Of Separation: An Object Relations Approach

A friend of mine recently qualified for the US Amateur in golf. This was a life long dream of his and he proceeded to finish last in a field of 160 players. These results were published in every major newspaper in the nation. Do you think he felt any embarrassment?

Shame and embarrassment are constant threats in sports because the game is usually played in front of people. Gabbard (1997) has written about performance anxiety and shame from an object-relations perspective. He suggests that shame is a narcissistic disturbance that impacts many who perform in front of an audience. Success or winning in an athlete can induce a feeling of separation from the family, the opponent or the crowd and this can produce considerable anxiety and shame. This shame and anxiety can inhibit performance. Conflicts that winning brings loss and separation derive from childhood when the child is given the message to stay close to the mother and never to leave her. Separation anxiety induced by winning or the threat of winning is exceedingly common. I was working with a professional female golfer who was leading a tournament up the 71st hole. She proceeded to 4 putt #17 and triple bogey 18 to lose. When asked to free associate; to this collapse she reported that she still feels like a little kid (she is in her early 30

Performing in front of a crowd provides enormous exhibitionistic excitement. This can bring with it a sense of shame that one is indulging in a taboo. I had a patient who was an extremely attractive female tennis player. She developed a growing sense of

dread the better she became. With improvement came an increase in the number of people who watched her play. She began to experience panic attacks in front of these crowds. Analysis revealed that during childhood she was expected to exhibit herself in front of her parents and their friends by showing off her body. This experience was both exciting for her and it also instilled shame. This early and latency age experience lay dormant and repressed until she began to achieve a measure of fame on the tennis courts whereupon she began to feel the same kind of shame over being watched. The adulation was a reminder of her childhood experiences and it produced a feeling that these crowds knew of her past abuse.

The Dread Of Success

Some athletes carry a dread of winning because it means that they are superior to others. Superiority, for some, means greed and selfishness. We all see this amply displayed by some professional athletes. The dread of success is especially felt in female athletes, some of whom are raised to think aggression is not nice. For many children raised religiously winning implies selfish striving which is considered sinful.

Occasionally a child raised in the lower class who later becomes a star with great fame and wealth has a sense of dread that they are leaving their families behind. This explains why you so often hear professional athletes say their true desire is to buy their mothers a home with the money they make.

Success can bring with it great guilt. The recent near disqualification of a pro golfer at a Tour event may have something to do with the dread of success. He had already won three tournaments this year. It was reported that before the tournament he had lost two close friends to sudden death. During the event he was nearly disqualified twice, once due to almost missing a tee time and once by marking his ball on the 72nd green a failing to replace it properly. If he had signed his scorecard without the score adjustment and the two shot penalty he would have been disqualified. A fan whom he later called his "guardian angel" saved him from disqualification by telling him of the infraction in time.

These very unusual mishaps were neither accidents as most would think nor divine intervention but may have had to do with the guilt over winning following the loss of his two friends. We saw a similar accident proneness in Dave Jansen during his Olympic speed skating mishaps which came on the heels of his sisters death. Guilt over winning is an unconscious but powerful barrier.

Self Psychology And Sports

Self psychology has emerged in the last few decades as an alternative to classical psychoanalytic instinct theory. Kohut (1977) moved the focus of psychoanalytic concern away from sexual and aggressive drives and onto self concepts. A cohesive sense of self esteem which is developed in childhood is thought to enable adults to cope with pressures inherent in sports. Conversely, a disordered self will fragment under extreme pressure.

It is very common to observe athletes with low self image fall into rage or despair at the first sign of difficulty. I recall a player I was working with who was leading a golf

tournament, missed one putt and had such anxiety and injury in him that he broke his putter over his knee, thereby guaranteeing a loss. His self-concept was so weak that the slightest sign of trouble was able to cause a collapse.

A fragmented or enfeebled self system can give way to temporary states of psychosis when under extreme pressure during competition. I recall a professional golfer leading a major a few years ago with only six holes to play. He had a fifteen foot putt on a par three and as he walked to the green he reported noticing the beauty of the trees on this course. He became obsessed with the "beauty of nature" for the last six holes as he proceeded to bogey in, thereby losing the tournament and also his reality testing for a few hours. We may have seen a similar problem in the 1999 British Open when Van de Velde appeared to lose possession of his faculties on the 72nd hole and made a triple bogey to lose the event that he could have won had he only been able to make a double bogey. I believe that the threat of self-fragmentation accounts for why so many athletes have one great performance and then never come close to that level again. It may be the memory of the pressure and how it threatens the integrity of the ego is felt to be so dangerous that these athletes find a way to avoid it in the future by backing off leads.

The experience of being "flooded" with affect as one fights for the lead in a sporting event can be explained with the concept of the self and its collapse. The collapse of ego boundaries when under pressure produces disorganization in thinking and what is referred to as choking. Many athletes unconsciously choose the effect of humiliation and depression over the effect of being flooded. As a result, mistakes and missed shots take on a new meaning in this light. Anything that gets them out of the pressure is a defensive maneuver used to remove the self from under pressure. Many of them say they try to "enjoy" themselves while under pressure to inhibit this overwhelming and psychosis producing emotion.

Freud And The Athlete: Instinct Theory And Sports

Sports are clearly about aggression. If you work with athletes you soon begin to realize just how much aggression they are capable of. The first time I met Keyshawn Johnson, wide receiver for the New York Jets, I recall that his size and power reminded me of a very large and dangerous locomotive. Boxers emanate power and grace as well thereby combining aggression and sexuality, the two basic drive states.

The inhibition of aggression occurs as a result of trauma, training in not to be aggressive or through difficulty during the oedipal phase of psychosexual development. Freud suggested that aggression is typically defended against by turning it into its opposite (passivity), turning it against oneself (self-defeat or depression) or by sublimating it through sports. Conflicts with aggression invariably leads to defeat. Tiger Woods

Horner (1981) has researched female inhibition of aggression. Women are often taught that aggression is unfeminine, not lady-like and are faced with the conflict of

winning versus being seen as "unfeminine." This conflict has an impact on performance and brings us to a discussion of secondary gain over losing.

Secondary Gain Found In Defeat

Secondary gain is a standard psychoanalytic concept and is considered a reason that neurotic symptoms are so difficult to give up. The same unconscious dynamic holds for self-defeat in sports. Loss has the potential to produce enormous secondary gain. One need only recall Greg Norman's humiliating defeat by giving up a six stroke lead in the 1996 Masters which was witnessed by millions of television viewers. In the next few weeks he received thousands of sympathy letters as well as supportive articles in all the major newspapers around the world. This sympathy can be quite reinforcing and gives defeat an unconscious appeal to some individuals.

Summary

This brief review of a psychoanalytic approach to anxiety in athletes should suggest that far from being an unnecessary afterthought in sports, psychoanalysis has the potential to provide a wide array of insights and interventions for the anxiety ridden athlete. Psychoanalysis alone provides a long-term relationship with the athlete which gives him or her the space in which to explore the many areas of disturbance they suffer with. Post trauma due to injury or embarrassing defeat is extremely common and is remedied only in a slow and careful manner. Often the problems these athletes have are deep-rooted and go untouched by standard cognitive-behavioral work. The hope for a quick fix that cognitive behavioral interventions often promise will usually lead to disappointment in all but the easiest cases. Athletes that suffer with narcissistic personalities, low self-image, inhibitions with aggression, guilt, shame or separation anxiety will usually require serious and delicate psychotherapy that psychoanalysis can provide. These conflicts can produce self-defeat that dynamics are largely unconscious. The therapist that plans on a full-time career in sport psychology would be advised to look into psychoanalytic training. I believe that the future of sport psychology will be found in a synthesis of cognitive-behavioral, or what I call the suppressive therapies, blending with psychoanalytic therapies which include long-term supportive treatment, modification of low self-image and ego strengthening measures, what are referred to as the expressive therapies.

POSTSCRIPT

It also may be of interest to the reader to know that when I am asked to provide commentary to the print, radio or television media on breaking sports stories they invariably seek my psychoanalytic insights into these stories and not my cognitive-behavioral knowledge. When players "choke" or act out off the playing field the media is able to deliver common sense explanations but come seeking my knowledge of the athletes unconscious motives to help the public sort out these headline events. I have found that I must tap into my psychoanalytic expertise to satisfy the fans and the media

questions. This provides yet another reason to include psychoanalytic thought into concerns about the sporting life.

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