

Peak performance starts in the mind



Photo by Michael Clapp
Judy Foster (l.) and Kay Porter help accentuate the psychological as well as physical factors important in peak athletic performance.

By Marilyn Osgood-Knight
Of the Emerald

The room was familiar, the sounds quietly melodic. She felt her breathing deepen as her body sank back into the chair. After reaching an alpha state of consciousness, the University varsity track athlete began calling up her private video screening. What she saw and experienced would have important psychological and physiological ramifications in future competition.

Welcome to the world of mental training for peak performance, also known as creative visualization, mental rehearsal, pregame meditation or instant replay. This technique is being used increasingly at the University, both by varsity athletes and recreational sports buffs.

For 15 or 20 minutes several times a week, an athlete relaxes his or her body and "practices" a specific sport mentally, imagining success and perfect form. In addition to improving performance, advocates say mental training can improve concentration and increase awareness of body position. It can also quicken the speed of learning new skills, restore energy, remove psychological blocks, improve relations between teammates and coaches, expedite the healing process, and heighten enjoyment of a favorite sport.

And expensive equipment or long-term training aren't necessary to learn the process, according to University graduates, Kay Porter and Judy Foster, who have joined forces to work in the field of sports and organizational psychology under the business name Porter Foster.

"You don't have to be sick to get better," notes Porter. "The days of 'head cases' are over. Sports psychology works to improve performance from a positive viewpoint. It's positive self-talk replacing negative imagery."

Porter, who was a professor at the University's Center for Gerontology for eight years, holds a Ph.D. in human developmental psychology. A marathon runner herself, she has conducted five studies on the psychological aspects of older female runners, and has been published nationally.

Judy Foster is a writer/artist with a degree in creative writing. She has used creative visualization techniques in her work since 1969.

The women work as equal partners, and again this year donated in-kind contributions of their services to the Duck Athletic Fund, to be used by varsity sports such as women's track and tennis teams. Porter Foster also is presenting a group clinic to the women's gymnastics team, both men's and women's swim teams, and has made contact with "about 14 University sports this year." They also provide individual mental training sessions for a fee (two or three appointments are needed).

"Mental training includes goal setting, positive self-statements, plans for altering negative self-talk during competition, relaxation techniques, creative visualization and mental rehearsal skills," says Foster. "We train athletes to analyze their individual performances. We show them how to look for ways to better their natural abilities from the psychological perspective."

There is a physical reason why such mental practice works, says Porter. As an athlete imagines herself practicing a sport, her neurons fire in exactly the same patterns as if she were performing physically. Small contractions also take place in the associated muscle groups, she explains. These movements of nerves and muscles are thought to improve neuromuscular coordination, which in turn improves performance.

The first step in mental training for peak performance, says Foster, "is figuring out what you want, what your short and long-term goals will be." If an athlete wants to lower his or her golf handicap, or increase "winnability" in age-division road races, Foster says to "put it down on paper as specifically as possible. Committing yourself to a target date is vital, too."

One University student prepared for the September Nike/OTC Marathon with Porter Foster's help. Mentally, the student practiced the 26.2-mile run repeatedly for three weeks before the race in addition to her physical workouts.

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