

SEABURY & PERFORMANCE

SP MONTHLY

2024 9

SPORTING REVIEW

SCIENTIFIC INSIGHT

CONTENT HIGHLIGHTS

July

Performance Psychology and Mental  
Performance





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## MESSAGE FROM TOM

The start of July marks the halfway point of the European Championships 2024 in Germany. At the time of writing this, England have just pulled off a miracle, finding a way past Slovakia via a 95th-minute bicycle kick winner courtesy of Jude Bellingham.

While this win caused celebration, the nation is also demonstrating worry and concern. Are England capable of being successful and winning the tournament? How can we get the best out of our players? What can we do to reinvigorate both the team and the nation of fans supporting them?

These questions demonstrate a crucial element of reflection that many high-performance teams must ask themselves regularly.

Just because we have succeeded (or not succeeded in England's case) in the past has no relevance to the constant self-assessments we must do in order to keep ourselves on track.

So whether it is the men's England national team, players preparing for Wimbledon, or the national squads preparing for the Olympic games, we have to ask the hard questions to ensure we continue to grow, thrive and find success.

Roll on the rest of the summer of sport!

*Tom Seabury*

DR TOM SEABURY





# A CROWD: A PERFORMANCE SHAPER

A crowd can be both a blessing and a challenge.

The cheers... the chants... the applause...

They can elevate our adrenaline levels, enhancing our physical and mental performance. This surge of energy can help us push through struggle and perform at our best.

However, it's important also to acknowledge the challenges a crowd can bring...

The high expectations, the fear of failure, and the sheer volume of noise can cause anxiety and stress.

This can lead to performance anxiety, where the fear of making mistakes hinders our ability to perform.

So... How can we harness a crowd to our advantage?

Prepare mentally - Visualisation techniques can help us imagine performing well in front of a large audience, reducing anxiety and building confidence.

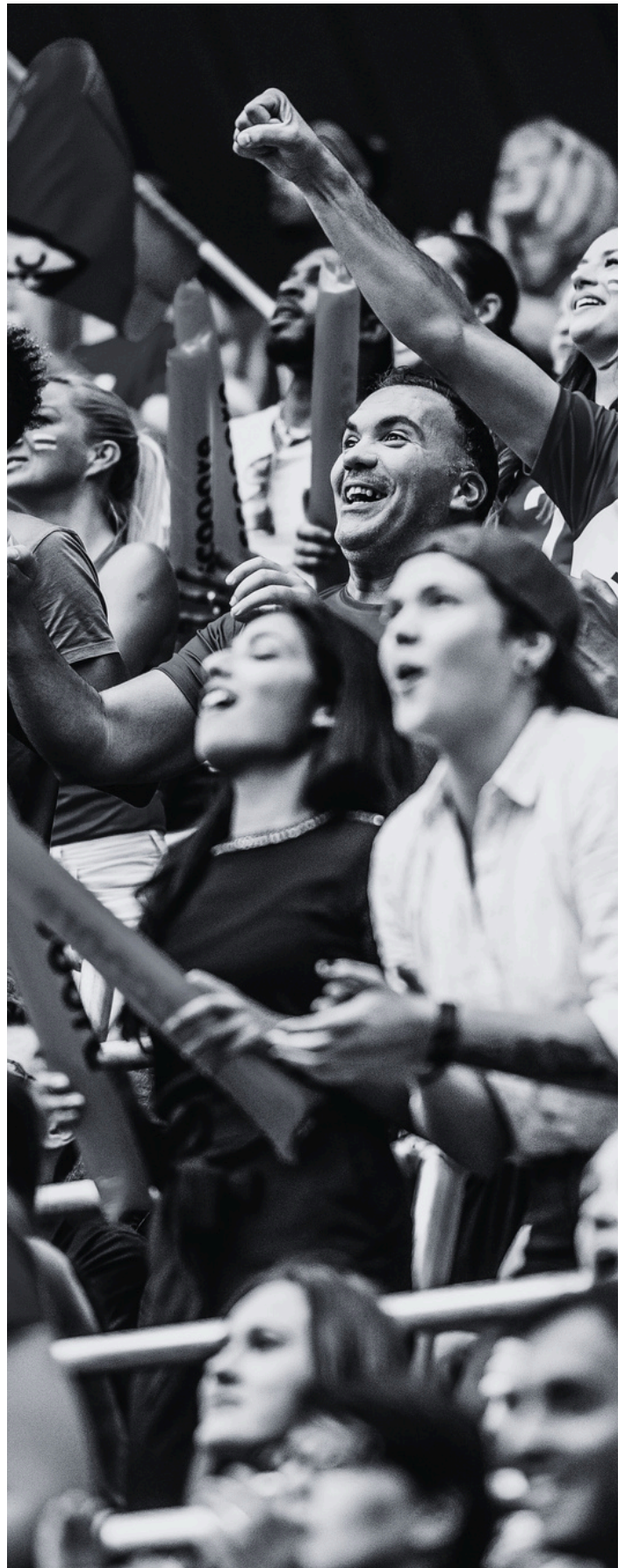
Develop focus techniques - Block out negative distractions. This could include deep breathing, positive self-talk, and mindfulness practices to keep our attention on our performance rather than the crowd.

Embrace and channel - Use the positive energy from the crowd. Utilise their support as a source of motivation and confidence. Acknowledge the crowd's presence and let their energy fuel our performance.

Pre-performance routines - Familiar routines can provide a sense of normalcy and control, helping us stay grounded and focused no matter the audience.

Rely on your support systems - coaches and teammates can help manage the psychological effects of the crowd. Their presence, encouragement and guidance can provide stability and reassurance.

Embrace the energy, stay focused, and let the crowd elevate your game to new heights.





## BOOK OF THE MONTH -

### THE HEART IS THE STRONGEST MUSCLE

Tia Toomey's book delves deep into her personal and professional life, offering readers an intimate look at the heart and determination required to reach the pinnacle of competitive fitness.

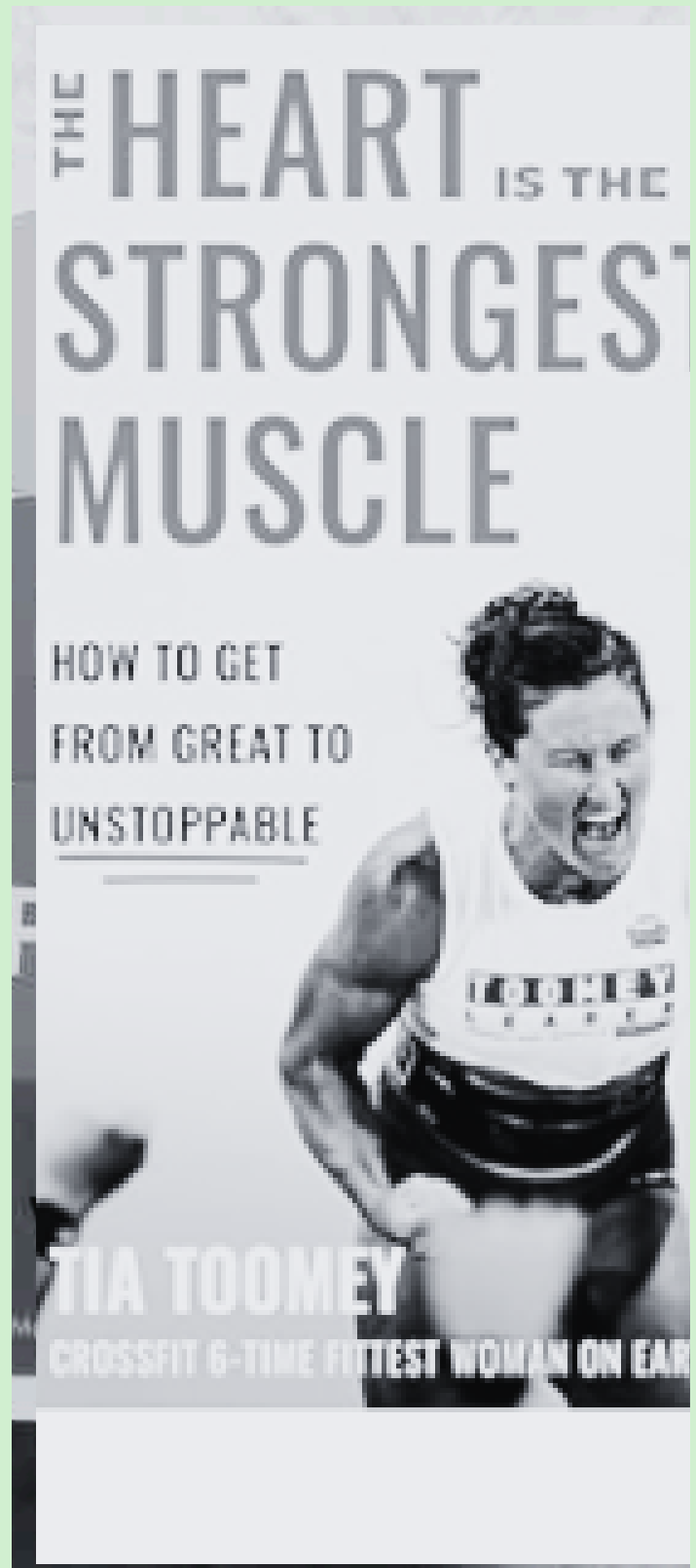
Toomey also shares her emotional and psychological battles, particularly the pressure of maintaining peak performance and the fear of failure. She candidly discusses the moments of doubt and her strategies to stay motivated and focused. Her narrative underscores the importance of mental toughness and resilience in achieving success, illustrating that the heart, indeed, is the biggest muscle.

In addition to her CrossFit journey, Toomey explores her venture into Olympic weightlifting, culminating in her participation in the 2016 Rio Olympics. She details the rigorous training, the highs and lows of competition, and the fulfillment of representing her country on the world stage. This experience broadened her perspective and further solidified her belief in the power of the human spirit.

This book chronicles Toomey's athletic achievements and serves as a motivational guide for anyone facing challenges in their pursuit of excellence. Through her story, Toomey encourages readers to embrace their passions, work relentlessly towards their goals, and cultivate a mindset that sees obstacles as opportunities for growth. Her book is a testament to the indomitable human spirit and a reminder that with heart and determination, anything is possible.

Her discussions on goal setting, maintaining focus, and the importance of a strong support system provide actionable advice for athletes at all levels. By sharing her experiences with injury, self-doubt, and competition stress, Toomey highlights the universal challenges faced by athletes, offering strategies to navigate these hurdles effectively.

This book is not only a source of motivation but also a practical handbook for athletes seeking to enhance their physical and mental performance, ultimately helping them to achieve their personal best in their respective sports.



BOOK BY TIA TOOMEY



# STRESS INOCULATION: A COACHING KEY

It is important that we are able to handle stress.

Focusing on systematically exposing ourselves to stressors in training can enhance can help with this.

It can aid our ability to cope with pressure during actual competitions.

This often involves three main phases:

Conceptualisation, skill acquisition, and application.

By gradually increasing the intensity and complexity of stressors, we can learn to manage physiological and psychological responses, ultimately improving their performance under pressure.

In the conceptualisation phase, involves educating about the nature of stress and how it affects performance.

Understanding the body's stress response and recognising the signs of stress is the first step towards effective management.

The skill acquisition phase involves teaching various coping mechanisms, such as relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, visualisation, and cognitive restructuring.

These skills help us reframe our perception of stress and develop a more resilient mindset.

The application phase involves practising these skills in increasingly stressful scenarios, both in training and simulated competitions.

This progressive exposure helps us build confidence in our ability to handle stress, reduce anxiety, and enhance focus during actual events.

By systematically exposing ourselves to stressors, we become accustomed to competition's mental and physical demands, leading to improved performance consistency.



# CORTISOL: INVESTIGATES THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRONIC STRESS, CORTISOL DYSFUNCTION, AND PAIN,

This study investigates the complex relationship between chronic stress, cortisol dysfunction, and pain, emphasising the importance of stress management in pain rehabilitation.

The authors explain that chronic stress leads to a maladaptive stress response involving prolonged or excessive cortisol secretion. This cortisol dysfunction results in widespread inflammation and heightened pain sensitivity, contributing to various chronic pain conditions. The paper details how the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis regulates the body's stress response, with acute stress initially promoting survival through cortisol release. However, sustained stress can disrupt this balance, leading to negative physical and psychological outcomes.

The study further explores how maladaptive cognitive responses to stress, such as catastrophising and rumination, can perpetuate cortisol dysfunction and chronic pain. These responses condition the body to react more sensitively to future stressors, creating a vicious cycle of stress and pain. The authors highlight the importance of addressing both the physical and psychological aspects of pain management, advocating for the inclusion of stress management techniques in rehabilitation programs.

By educating patients about the interplay between stress and pain and incorporating interventions like cognitive-behavioral therapy and mindfulness, healthcare providers can improve pain management outcomes, prevent chronic disability, and enhance the quality of life for individuals experiencing chronic pain.

Understanding the relationship between stress, cortisol dysfunction, and pain is crucial for athletes recovering from injuries for several reasons:

Psychological Impact on Healing: Athletes often face significant stress during injury recovery, including concerns about their performance, career prospects, and physical abilities. This stress can hinder the healing process by promoting a maladaptive stress response and cortisol dysfunction, leading to prolonged inflammation and pain.

Stress Management: Incorporating stress management techniques, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness, and relaxation exercises, can help athletes modulate their stress response. This can prevent the exacerbation of pain and inflammation, promoting a more effective and quicker recovery.

Holistic Rehabilitation: A comprehensive rehabilitation program that includes psychological support can address both the physical and mental challenges athletes face. This holistic approach ensures that athletes are better equipped to manage stress and avoid the negative cycle of stress-induced pain.

Preventing Re-injury: By understanding and managing stress, athletes can reduce re-injury risk. Chronic stress can impair the immune system and weaken the body's ability to repair tissues, making athletes more susceptible to new injuries or setbacks during recovery.

The integration of stress management into injury rehabilitation is essential for athletes to recover fully and maintain their performance levels. Addressing the psychoneuroendocrine aspects of stress and pain can significantly enhance the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs.

# BREATHING - A PERFORMANCE SHAPER

Breathing is a fundamental physiological process that can profoundly shape both the body and mind during sporting competition.

Controlled breathing techniques help regulate the body's stress response, promoting a state of calm and focus. During high-pressure situations, athletes who can control their breath are better equipped to manage anxiety and maintain mental clarity.

Techniques can effectively calm the nervous system, reduce cortisol levels, and foster a state of relaxed alertness. This mental state is crucial for making strategic decisions, maintaining concentration, and executing skills with precision. By managing their breathing, athletes can mitigate the negative effects of stress, such as impaired judgment and reduced motor control, ensuring they perform at their best when it matters most.

There are many breathing techniques athletes can utilise. Here are some examples that can be used to aid your performance:

**Diaphragmatic Breathing** - This involves taking deep breaths that fully engage the diaphragm, filling the lungs completely. This technique is beneficial for promoting relaxation and reducing stress.

**Box Breathing** - A technique used to calm the mind and enhance focus. It involves four steps: inhaling for four counts, holding the breath for four counts, exhaling for four counts, and holding again for four counts.

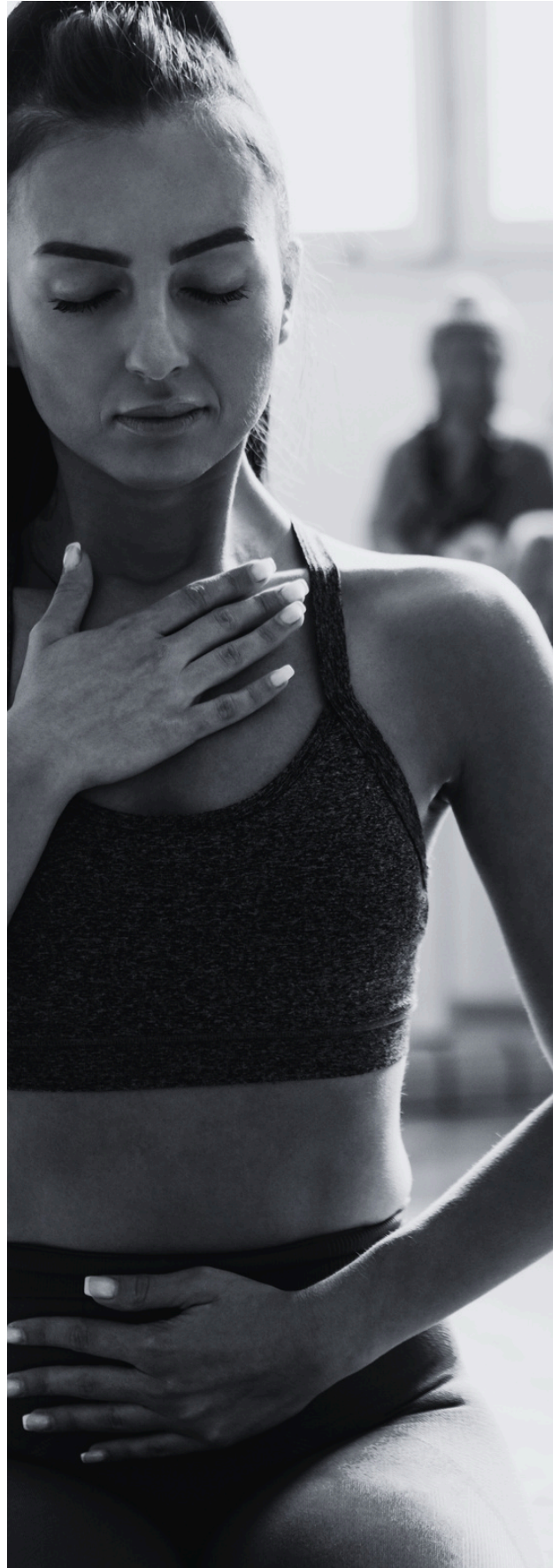
**Pursed-Lip Breathing** - A technique that helps control the rate and depth of breathing, promoting efficient oxygen exchange. Athletes can practice this by inhaling slowly through the nose for a count of two, then exhaling gently through pursed lips (as if blowing out a candle) for a count of four.

**Rhythmic Breathing** - involves synchronising breaths with movements, which is particularly beneficial in endurance sports such as running or cycling.

**Alternate Nostril Breathing** - A practice derived from yoga, helps balance the nervous system and enhance mental focus.

**Mindful Breathing**

Mindful breathing involves paying close attention to each breath, focusing on the sensation of air entering and leaving the body.





## OMEGA 3- A FUEL FOR THE BRAIN

Omega-3 fatty acids, particularly EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid), are essential nutrients crucial in maintaining and enhancing cognitive health. These fatty acids are fundamental components of cell membranes in the brain, influencing their fluidity and functional capacity. Adequate levels of DHA, in particular, are critical for the proper development and functioning of the nervous system. Supplementing with omega-3s can help ensure that the brain receives sufficient amounts of these vital nutrients, especially for individuals who may not consume enough through their diet alone.

Research has demonstrated that omega-3 supplementation can have several cognitive benefits. For instance, omega-3s are known to possess anti-inflammatory properties, which can help reduce neuroinflammation - a contributing factor to cognitive decline and neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's.

Moreover, studies suggest that omega-3 fatty acids can enhance synaptic plasticity, which is the ability of synapses (the connections between neurons) to strengthen or weaken over time in response to activity levels. This enhancement is crucial for learning, memory formation, and overall cognitive flexibility. Additionally, omega-3s have been shown to support mood regulation and may be beneficial in managing conditions such as depression and anxiety, which are often linked to cognitive dysfunction.

Due to the unique mental and physical demands of competitive sports, the cognitive benefits of omega-3 fatty acids are particularly important for athletes. Athletes require sharp cognitive functions for strategic thinking, quick decision-making, and maintaining focus during high-pressure situations.

Omega-3 fatty acids (particularly DHA and EPA) support these cognitive needs by enhancing brain function and protecting against cognitive decline. By improving synaptic plasticity and neurotransmission, omega-3s help athletes maintain mental clarity, improve reaction times, and enhance overall cognitive performance, which are crucial for competitive success.





# DISTANCE RUNNING - THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGE

Distance running is not merely a test of physical endurance but also a profound psychological challenge. The mental battle that runners face during a race involves various elements, including pacing strategy, pain management, motivation, and the ability to stay focused. Understanding these psychological aspects can provide insight into the mental fortitude required to succeed.

### Pacing Strategy

One of the primary psychological challenges for distance runners is managing their pacing strategy. Runners must balance the need to conserve energy for the race's later stages with the desire to maintain a competitive position. This requires acute self-awareness and disciplined control. Overpacing early in the race can lead to burnout, while underpacing can cause a slower time and the frustration of realising that more effort could have been exerted. Runners often engage in a continuous internal dialogue, adjusting their pace based on their perception of effort, physical sensations, and competitors' positions.

### Pain Management and Endurance

Endurance sports inherently involve physical discomfort and pain, making pain management a critical psychological element. Distance runners must develop strategies to cope with the inevitable fatigue and discomfort that arise during a race. This includes techniques such as dissociation, where runners distract themselves from the pain by focusing on external factors like the scenery or other runners, and association, where they concentrate on their body's sensations to monitor and manage their effort levels.

### Motivation and Mental Resilience

Maintaining motivation throughout a long race is another significant psychological challenge. Runners often set personal goals, whether it's achieving a specific time, placing in a certain position, or simply finishing the race. As the race progresses, fatigue sets in, and the initial motivation can wane. Runners must draw on their intrinsic motivation and mental resilience to keep pushing forward. This involves a strong sense of purpose, self-belief, and overcoming negative thoughts.

### Focus and Concentration

Staying focused throughout a long race is a considerable mental challenge. Distance running requires sustained concentration on various factors, including breathing, stride mechanics, and the race environment. Distractions or a lapse in concentration can lead to mistakes, such as tripping, poor pacing, or missing a key move by a competitor. Mental fatigue can be as debilitating as physical fatigue, leading to a decline in performance. Runners must practice mental discipline to maintain their focus and stay present in the moment, effectively managing their thoughts and external distractions.



## QUOTE OF THE MONTH

**“Aim for progression, not perfection, as perfection often feels far too far away.”**

**Sir David Brailsford**

Adopting a mindset of "aiming for progression, not perfection" is immensely beneficial for athletes.

This approach encourages continuous improvement and acknowledges that development is a journey, not a destination. When athletes focus on progression, they set realistic, incremental, achievable and measurable goals.

This helps maintain motivation and build confidence, as they can see tangible results from their efforts. Small, consistent improvements accumulate over time, leading to significant advancements in skills and performance.

Perfection, on the other hand, is an abstract and often unattainable goal. Striving for perfection can create undue pressure and lead to frustration and disappointment when inevitable mistakes or setbacks occur. This can harm an athlete's mental health and overall well-being, potentially causing burnout or a loss of passion for the sport.

By shifting the focus to progression, athletes learn to appreciate their achievements, no matter how small, and use them as stepping stones toward greater success.

Moreover, a progression-oriented mindset fosters resilience and adaptability. Athletes become better equipped to handle challenges and setbacks, viewing them as opportunities for learning and growth rather than failures. This resilience is crucial in competitive sports, where the ability to recover from mistakes and continue improving can make the difference between winning and losing.

Emphasising progression helps athletes develop a growth mindset, where they understand that effort and perseverance are key to overcoming obstacles and achieving long-term goals.



# A COACH- THE CHOICE OF AN ATHLETE

Selecting the right coach is a pivotal decision that can significantly influence an athlete's chances of success. A coach is more than just an instructor; they are mentors, motivators, and strategists who shape an athlete's skills, mindset, and career trajectory. The impact of a well-chosen coach extends beyond technical training to include many aspects of achieving peak performance and long-term success.

## Strategic Planning and Game Management

Beyond skill development, a good coach is essential for strategic planning and game management. They study opponents, develop game plans, and make real-time decisions during competitions.

## Psychological Support and Motivation

Athletic success is as much a mental game as it is a physical one. Coaches play a critical role in providing psychological support and motivation. They help athletes build mental resilience, cope with pressure, and maintain focus.

## Personalised Attention and Adaptability

Every athlete is unique, with individual strengths, weaknesses, and learning styles. The right coach recognises these differences and adapts their approach to meet the specific needs of each athlete. Personalised attention ensures that training programs are effective and that athletes receive the support they need to thrive.

## Long-term Career Management

Successful athletic careers require careful planning and management. A knowledgeable coach provides guidance on career decisions, such as competition schedules, sponsorship opportunities, and transition planning. They help athletes set realistic goals, track progress, and navigate the complexities of professional sports.

## Building Trust and Relationships

The relationship between an athlete and a coach is built on trust and mutual respect. A coach who invests in building a strong, positive relationship creates a supportive environment where athletes feel valued and understood.

## Role Modeling and Ethical Guidance

Coaches serve as role models, exemplifying the values and behaviours they wish to instil in their athletes. The right coach demonstrates professionalism, integrity, and a strong work ethic, setting a standard for athletes to follow.







## FINAL THOUGHTS

June saw an exciting moment for Seabury Performance with the launch of the SP podcast. This podcast aims to explore all things related to sport and human performance. Through interviews, Q&As, and roundtable discussions, we dive into the world of sport and performance, uncovering the wider context of the industry while also providing strategies for increasing performance on and off the court/field. To check out the first episodes of this podcast, visit either YouTube or Spotify.

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