SPECIAL OLYMPIC FEATURE

At Barcelona, for the first time, New Zealand's Olympic team will have a sport psychologist. Kiwi athletes are catching up with the philosophy that what you think is what you get...

Training the brain

By ROB GREENAWAY

AS THE WORLD'S elite athletes stretch their bodies to the limit, they are being overtaken by those who have also stretched their minds. The New Zealand Olympic movement is just catching up.

When Annelise Coberger whipped from eighth to second place after her final run at the women's slalom in the Winter Olympics, she made a clear statement about how important it is to be mentally prepared to win. On her first run she trailed the leader by 0.8 of a second.

"I just kind of sat in the cafeteria and got angrier and angrier and I think that helped me, because I was really aggressive in the second (run). I had nothing to lose and I went all out and it paid off," she is reported as saying. In fact, her style and aggression trimmed almost five seconds off her first run, giving her a quarter of a second lead over third placed Blanca Fernandez of Spain and pulling herself to within half a second of a gold.

While the course was the same for both runs and the weather had not changed, Coberger's state of mind had. And that, according to New Zealand's leading sport psychologists, is what gives a top athlete the edge to go that extra mile, or, in Coberger's case, that extra 100th of a second that might clinch victory.

Although the concept of sport psychology has been around since just after the turn of this century, the idea of systematically training the mind to cope with the rigours of top level competition has only recently caught on in New Zealand.

For sport psychologists the catch phrase is, 'you don't have to be sick to get better,' and, as the record books show, athletes are certainly moving faster, reaching further and constantly surprising the judges.

After the 1988 Seoul Olympics, many of our top-level athletes returned home describing edges gained by hundreds of elite international competitors, using professional sport psychologists. They wanted to see what the mental experts could do for them, and their prompting led the New Zealand Olympic and Commonwealth Games Association (NZOCGA) to send our Olympic team's first sport psychologist to the 1992 Games.

The person chosen is Dr Ken Hodge, a founding member of the New Zealand Sport Psychology Association (NZSPA) and the first sport psychologist to hold a tertiary teaching position within this country. While he spends most of his time lecturing at the School of Physical Education at the University of Otago, Hodge also works as a sport psychology consultant, spreading the word that achievement is more mind over matter than we might imagine.

Sport psychology is a bit like the cheese advert: it's old, but it's new. The adage 'watch the ball' still has its place, especially, says Hodge, in a game like golf, which involves fine body control.

"Say 'watch the ball' in your mind. Repeat it like a mantra - 'watch the ball, watch the ball, watch the ball ...' If you're telling yourself to watch the ball then you actually do that," he advises. "And if you're telling yourself that, then you have to concentrate correctly. You can't have two thoughts in your head. You can't be thinking, 'Oh god, I'm going to hook this into the water'. And if you are not thinking of the water then you will have a greater chance of hitting the ball straight.

"In golf, once you have selected your club and decided where to send the ball, the only thing you want to consider is the ball and the stroke mechanics of hitting it. Not how bad the last shot was, or what the putting is going to be like."

It is this modest type of recommendation that has improved the game of long-term professional golfers, as well as Hodge's mother and seven year-old nephew.

Sounds simple? Regrettably, not all sports have a ball, and for those that do, there is usually far more to the game than just hitting it. There is also a little stigma associated with the idea of psychology. When, for example, do we get to sit on the couch and discuss those wingless butterflies of our childhood?

When Hodge returned to New Zealand in 1988, after completing his doctorate in sport psychology at the university of Illinois, his adopted science was widely accepted in the States. Although New Zealand coaches have almost always recognised the need to discipline the mind, the concept of systematically training an athlete with the help of a professional psychologist was possibly a little risque. Hodge expected some resistance, especially from the patrons of the cultural icon which gave him his own fridge-like physique.

"I thought rugby would be the last sport to come around to sport psychology because it is traditionally viewed as being a very conservative activity," he says. "But after the first World Cup

DOCTORS ... Jackson and Hodge.

the top teams seemed to change their attitudes, especially in the way they trained - both physically and psychologically - and the way they organised their skills."

Work with netballers and individual athletes followed. And then came the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

"Prior to the 1988 Games, the natural misconception was held that sport psychology was only a form of clinical psychology for people who had problems," says Hodge. "But, after 1988, athletes began stating openly that they used professional sport psychologists, and they competed well."

There are no couches or trimmed butterflies in sport psychology. There is heart rate, breathing, stress, and controlling and using anxiety. Self-talk, imagery, motivation and focusing are the buzz words (see box), all circling around the term 'arousal'.

Just how excited - or aroused - should an athlete get? Bjorn Borg played tennis as if he was an emotionless robot. One of his opponents, John McEnroe, screamed at umpires and threw infantile tantrums, playing tennis on the edge. But both almost always hit the ball in the right direction.

The best athletes work hard to find their optimum levels of arousal, and then they must work out ways to get there consistently. Often this means an athlete must 'psych down', rather than 'psych up' as they always do in designer American sports movies.

The Olympic biathlon, for example, starts with an exhausting cross-country ski race, followed by rifle shooting. After the gross physical requirements of skiing, athletes must psych down - control their breathing, reduce heart rates and, if their mental abilities are up to it, fire between heart beats when body tremor is minimal. It's the sort of skill that professional Scandinavian soldiers require, reflecting the biathlon's origin as an army training exercise.

But in the killing fields, only the killer gets near anything like a podium. Coming second in the bad old days meant coming last.

Which is possibly why we are still so preoccupied with winning. The popular conception of 'doing your best' means coming first. The home country idolises victorious athletes, and sponsors love them.

When the need to win at all costs comes into play, costs become high. Take Mike Tyson - the body of a gorilla and the mind of a mechanically motivated attack-guppy. With the help of modern and expensive sport technology, he became the ideal boxing investment, worth even a raft of lawyers to attempt to keep him in the ring. Where would Tyson have ended up under his own steam? Well, probably where he is today - in prison.

So, do we risk replacing good old Kiwi grit and determination with prescription sporting professionals, programmed to win an increasingly costly game?

Olympic Association Sports Science Commission chairman, Ian Boyd, doesn't think so. He believes that Kiwi athletes' personal motivations will be supported, not supplanted, by academic policy. He admits that other countries, particularly those in the East, have taken a more proactive approach with young performers, citing gymnasts as examples. When training begins at the age of four, the performers are unlikely to have made conscious decisions about their futures.

"But our athletes have to have self-determination and that's not an implanted thing," Boyd says. "Sport psychology will help draw out that determination and make it more positive in the way it's applied.

"The New Zealand Olympic movement generally doesn't become involved with athletes who are under 17 or 18 years old, a little younger for swimmers and gymnasts. We are helping these people lift themselves from being excellent to being up there with the top in the world."

And to win? "There's no second chance in the Olympics," Boyd says. "The athletes must be ready on the day. They can't just re-think what they've done and try again. We want them to be as well prepared as they can be, and this is where the sport psychologist can help."

Ian Boyd should know. In the 1956 Olympics he faced 120,000 spectators at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. It was the final of the 1500m and he was representing Great Britain.

"I could hardly warm up," he recounts. "Normally I'd run for a couple of miles before an event, but this time I was just too scared. I was up against runners I'd only ever heard about and there was a great deal of nervous tension. But I knew I had the training, and whether I warmed up or not I could run the race.

"If athletes don't have that confidence, it can be quite devastating for them to find that their legs can't even handle the warm up."

Boyd got his confidence from his coach - Austrian Franz Stanpfl - whom he describes as an amateur psychologist. And would a professional have been a help? "At times," he replies.

"You can always get by, but whether an athlete would do as well without formal mental training is the question that we've addressed. And as this is the first time that we'll be using a sport psychologist at the Games, we're going to be monitoring what happens."

For Hodge, the success of being at the Games won't necessarily be measured in medals. "Athletes need to compete at a consistent level of personal success," he says, "and we want to help them achieve what they want. Winning, although important, is secondary to the athlete's welfare."

Winning is certainly not a dirty word in Hodge's vocabulary, but winning involves too many things which the athlete can't control. The most obvious is the opponent. All the training in the world is not going to compensate for the fact that an athlete's moment of personal glory coincides with a peak in the career of some record-breaking leviathan of international sports. Then there are the vagaries of weather, referees and judges.

"There are all sorts of things which at times seem to conspire against athletes, even though they are performing well," says Hodge. "Winning can be a very threatening goal. We don't say, 'don't think about winning'. We trust they want to win, and everybody else - Mum and Dad, the coach, the media - will all remind them that winning is their ultimate aim. But we will focus on

something different."

The skill Hodge describes is based on performance goals, where the athlete sets personal objectives. It goes something like this: 'If I want to win this race I have to do it in a certain time. If that is realistic for me to achieve then I should get the gold medal. If I don't, then someone else has done better, and I can't control the other person. But what I can control is my effort, my organisation and my concentration, and if I do that, then I have competed at my personal best.'

"Winning and losing only happens at the end," says Hodge. "There are lots of other things to aim for in the meantime." However, any Kiwi Olympian who expects a quick psychological band-aid from Hodge when they are in Barcelona will probably be disappointed.

"I'll try and be available to everyone, but I'll spend most of my time with the coaches and athletes who have tried to do some sport psychology before the games," he says. "If they don't know the basic mental skills and get problems which take their minds off their sport, then there's not a lot I'm going to be able to do. It's like expecting them to adopt a whole new technique in their physical skills while they are on the plane to Spain. It's simply too late."

But it's never too late for those aspiring to reach the Olympics, sometime in the future. Which is why the International Olympic Committee has funded $80,000 for a series of seminars in New Zealand on psychological skills training for top female athletes. The programme is managed by the NZOCGA, which, when considering all the other international funding the association receives, makes it a significant earner of foreign exchange, and importer of foreign expertise.

Dr Sue Jackson, an Australian with an American doctorate, has been invited to New Zealand from the University of North Carolina to join Hodge in the delivery of a series of seminars titled 'Psychology in Coaching Female Athletes'. So, does sport psychology offer different training skills for each sex? Basically, the answer is no.

"The methods of training the mind that sport psychology offers are gender-free," explains Jackson. "But in developing an athlete's psychological skills we have to begin with the skills they already possess. These skills are largely based on an athlete's personal background and upbringing."

The basic social issues of self-confidence, self esteem, sex stereotypes, and a small stock of female role models, are the things Jackson is talking about. Which, then, comes first - a great leap forward in society's attitudes to women, or a great dose of sport psychology for women?

Jackson doubts that society will change fast enough to help today's, or tomorrow's, female athletes. "Perhaps sport psychology does need to take more of an active role," she says.

"Through the seminars we have gathered New Zealand coaches who train female athletes, and as a result they should increase their perspective on mental skills. If they learn something that can be applied to male athletes, then that's a bonus. But we want to see these skills get women where the investment on sports training is relatively small."

Jackson's international perspective on New Zealand competitors is encouraging. "New Zealanders have a very positive attitude towards sport," she says. "They participate actively, and do incredibly well on the international scene, and yet they have achieved so much with so little systematic attention to the mental component of competition. A great deal of improvement is therefore possible, which could mean big things for New Zealand sports."

And for the athlete, according to Hodge, it will mean more confidence in the international arena. "With the right mental skills," he believes, "an athlete can say, 'whatever happens, I can deal with it'." ■

FOTOPACIFIC

COBERGER ... a changed state of mind.

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What the words mean

MOTIVATION: These are my short term goals, these are my long term goals, and these are my dreams.

FOCUSING: This is the task at hand, this is the one thing that I am here for.

IMAGERY: I can visualise myself achieving my personal best. This is what my run will look like.

SELF-TALK: 'Explosive start, get the speed, get the speed, keep the pace, keep the pace, keep the pace ...'