Psychology and Performance

QUESTION: What psychological differences between men and women might have an impact on performance in sports such as rowing?

ANSWER: Although a great deal of research has been done on male and female psychological differences since the turn of the century, there is still much to be learned in this area and eventually put into practical use in the workplace and in athletics. Because this information may enable an athlete to attain a higher level of performance, it will be crucial for coaches, trainers, and athletes to consider it.

For example, it has been found that generally women tend to have more self-doubts than men in any competitive situation. When a boy competes, he expects to achieve and be positively recognized for what he has done. On the other hand, girls do not believe that a good performance is necessarily a reflection of their talents and do not expect acclamation for their efforts. Consequently, coaches and fellow athletes may be surprised when a female has difficulty “living up to her potential.” Although the athlete may consciously believe that she is giving her all, conflicts about moving ahead may be hiding beneath the surface as she views her competitive urges as “unfeminine,” aggressive, or destructive. The changes we now see in our society may eventually work to modify some of these differences, but for the time being the knowledge that men and women deal differently with feelings about competition can be used constructively by coaches and trainers.

Helping the female to identify and discuss her fears of success is often most helpful. For women, each success carries with it the threat of losing important connections with other people. Performance is again compromised. If a coach, trainer, friend or therapist can help the woman feel better about pursuing her own interests without the belief that others are diminished by her enhancement, she will have increased freedom to pursue her goals without feeling selfish. Likewise, if a male is having difficulty achieving his potential, the difficulty may not always lie in diet or training but the conflicts that performing well raises for him. These are often different from the ones described for women but can often be resolved by the same method of sorting out the issues that winning raises. Self awareness is the key.

Men and women also deal with conflictual situations differently. One coach I know gave the following example from rowing. One male player was angry with another for not doing his part to help the team. After practice, the rower hit the other to make his point. The tension on the shell diminished and performance was enhanced. The two men went back to being friends and good teammates. On the other hand, women players will often try to “bury the conflict” by suppressing their emotions and feelings. Because conflictual situations are an inevitable part of teamwork, it is crucial to somehow get the problems out in the open where differences can be aired and worked out. Coaches who work with women might find it helpful to have ongoing discussions about team problems and conflicts because women find this a useful way of coping with their feelings. As males in our society are increasingly given permission to discuss their feelings and problems openly, new ways of dealing with personal and team conflicts other than physical reactions—such as group discussions—will inevitably be used in athletics.

There are other observable differences between males and females in a number of psychological areas. These include work and game preferences, intellectual development, and cognitive approaches to problems. There has been a shift away from the contention in the early 20th century that females are generally intellectually inferior to males. Rather, each sex seems to have specific areas of intellectual strengths, and of course, a great deal of individual variation occurs. Practice also improves perception and performance considerably in games and activities for both sexes.

It is generally conceded that males and females have different value systems and consequently make different kinds of decisions, in moral or ethical areas. There are few hard and fast answers in this most exciting area of contemporary psychology. However, the results will unquestionably have an impact on sports as new coaching methods are developed, ways of learning enhanced, and performance heightened by increased awareness of emotional life. I am very interested in studying this aspect of psychology and would welcome your input. Reactions of team members, incidents that occurred during a practice or competition and how male/female participants responded to coaching approaches you've noticed or witnessed—any comments you'd like to share would be appreciated. Send your ideas to me, c/o American Rowing, 201 S. Capitol Avenue, Suite 400, Indianapolis, IN 46225.

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