

Performing – a contest between stress and challenge

Since the column last week, two elite level bowlers with good recent form in national competitions have approached me over concerns they have about the variation in their level of performance, one game they blitz the next game they struggle.

The first thing I suggest for them is don't be too critical, it will happen, just learn from the experience(s) with a view to minimizing the (lower) range of performance..

Just had to make this conversation a special December column as it is familiar to all of us in sport, not only bowls.

For any profile bowler, sports person, winning is something they expect regularly, hence their profile as performers in our sport. However these profile players have one added contest in that every game they enter an event – EVERYONE wants to beat them, simply to be able to gloat, they did (win).

You profile players out there need to get used to that (stress or pressure).

One of the two elite bowlers I mentioned spoke to me about the 'stress of the match' that affects him. When he explained further it appears that frustration differs from singles to the fours team format. In the fours the distraction or stress may be more the demeanour of others in the rink displaying poor (stress) coping behavior.

He mentioned getting help 'reaching a level of relaxation' in the bowls event. He has answered his own concern, i.e. find your own relaxation level.

Immediately I react by referring to further mental skill work in our training. Remember these two blokes are elite level. They need to be on top of these emotional 'intrusions' into consistent performance. Not so for the rest of us scallywags who try our best with minimal or relevant training.

My first reaction is to steer the topic around and ask them to explain the game plan they took into the events and a discussion analyzing the results against the plan. That may reveal a lot about the varying performance levels, especially in the absence of any plan.

How I intend going about this relevant training when we next train together (though one of the two bowlers is interstate so my advice is via technology not direct supervised coaching) is to step up their current level of technical skill delivery rating to start with. Again note, every training session should have a purpose, otherwise what are you training?

Just one note though – all these delivery ratings are of minimal value if your mental and tactical skills are vastly inferior to your delivery skill. Poor choices and inferior focus or emotion in competition, where it counts, will always hinder your advance despite a great technical or delivery skill.

Did you know Jack Nicklaus, golfing great, worked harder on his mental and tactical skill as he already observed he was not as technically fluent as other profile golfers? Learn from these examples bowlers.

Then, most important, train with simulated heads or conditions that appear in games and are seen as 'stressful' or 'pressure' and have the bowler, repeatedly, apply their honed deliveries to work out which option is best suited to the situation to convert or to maintain damage. Importance here is the repetition of the precise delivery with the repetition for the mental and tactical skill operating too.

For example in our sessions intensity includes the knowledge and application of rehearsal and recall of choice, delivery and outcome. That enables the player to be familiar to a competition setting, or head, where the training becomes the game and the brain snaps into (familiar and repeated) action transferring training to the event situation.

Stress is personal. We will have to get the players to describe to me what pressure is to them; then set up such a practical situation and make it familiar to them. Sorting through various delivery options to erase the pressure so that when it appears in a game, and it will why else are

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we labeling it pressure, the player is accustomed to the situation, and, to the options open to him, and, the best choices to consider based on training solutions.

Again in discussion with these players, they and others voiced their frustration at their range of recorded performances in events. Meaning, they can play from 50% effective one day up to 70% effective. And it can vary depending on the perceived level of the opposition.

Welcome to the human race boys (and girls, I do coach gals too)!

My advice, don't stress out on the result of the opposition. Challenge your delivery 'pbs'. We use one part of training to gauge player delivery 'pbs' and it is invaluable to see if these can be applied, subject to good tactical choice, in each and every game the bowlers compete in.

That training means we train at an intensity similar to that expected in elite level events, training though spiced with a bit of fun. Training also in a squad, like athletics and swimming, where we have peers with the same mindset who can keep us honest, who can instill a desire to perform better. Hence I reckon the players can take that skill rating and intensity from training into most events. Note most events, no guarantee all events. Never any guarantees.

Note also the important events, not every event. Because not every event is important. Keep your best for the best.

Hawthorn club won the nationally televised AFL Football premiership in September though losing 4 of 22 games during the year. This week their coach reportedly said the runners up, Geelong, was still the leader in the competition having lost only 1/22 games. He saw them as the 'pb' team despite their loss in the final.

Keep that football mindset at the forefront of your approach.

Interesting that our two bowlers have expressed this stress and pressure concern. In July 2007 I met with Safuan, Boy, Lina and Chooie in Malaysia for some coaching, and Saf expressed exactly the same concern re stress and pressure. All I did at the time was sit and listen and then advise about the joy of the game, the chase of the challenge. His passion and dedication to succeed. As we know Saf is the current dual world indoor and singles champion.

What should drive us is the passion. That passion to perform well or in my case to coach as best I can. What I try to weed out of bowlers is the preoccupation with the fear of failure, or the annoyance or envy of allowing another player to roll us in a game. Worse if you think they are inferior. Aren't we all compared to someone else on this earth! Too small minded, but human too.

Passion will drive you to enjoy, to strive, that is train, further, to thrill at the chase (of the challenge being in bigger bowls leagues), to thrill at your constant application of skill at each new and higher level.

For my two bowls mates concerned about their current concerns, let's explore these concerns, these possible solutions at training in our squad surrounded by others keen to learn and contribute to our collective advancement; all of us driven by the passion to be better as players, or coach, trying always to do it well, to excel.

No more, no less. Enjoy

P.S. Congrats Brett Wilkie on a fabulous tournament in UK, just falling short of the big one