

Sport Mental Training Thoughts During This Time Without Volleyball (Part 1)

Hello Everyone,

I hope you are all safe and well during these uncertain times. I feel very fortunate to have been able to work with some of you during the last few provincial team seasons, and I wanted to share a few thoughts with all of you that I hope will be helpful during this season without volleyball.

Self-Awareness & Self-Regulation (An Explanation)

I feel that perhaps the two most significant contributions sport mental training can offer you during this challenging time are rooted in the mental training tools of self-awareness and self-regulation. Self-awareness refers to the ability to accurately assess the situation you find yourself in, accurately assess how you are responding to it, and know if you need to change your response. Self-regulation refers to the ability to effectively change your response to a situation, if a change is required. For example, think of yourself at the service line. Self-awareness means that perhaps you notice you are feeling nervous and you realize it is because you are worried about missing the serve. Self-regulation means that you intentionally switch your thoughts to something you can control (e.g., aiming at a target) as a way of reducing your nervousness.

Applying Self-Awareness To Your Current Situation

This then brings us to your current situation – the loss of playing volleyball during this pandemic. A first important step in processing this loss is self-awareness, being open and honest about how this feels. I suspect for a lot of you this really sucks! You want to be out playing, competing, hanging out with teammates, travelling to tournaments, etc. It is important to acknowledge that it sucks and to not pretend it is something that it isn't. Being open and honest about what you are experiencing is an important first step in finding effective ways to manage it.

Applying Self-Regulation To Your Current Situation

The second important step is self-regulation, and it starts with asking yourself a very important question: "Am I really thinking in a way that will give me the best chance of success (Williams, Zinsser, & Bunker, 2015, p. 278)?" To self-regulate you need to intentionally transition your thinking from what you are disappointed about to what you can do despite the challenging circumstances in which you find yourself. Just like in the above-mentioned serving example, you intentionally switch your thoughts to something you can control. This transition takes you from negative self-talk to neutral or positive self-talk. If you are in your last year of club and/or provincial team eligibility, and are not planning on playing post-secondary volleyball, it is particularly important that you start to transition your thoughts to new positive goals that can start to generate within you excitement as you pursue dreams outside the world of playing volleyball.

Sport Mental Training Thoughts During This Time Without Volleyball (Part 2)

Don't Suppress (Bury) Negative Thoughts – Use Them As Reminders To Think Positive Thoughts

Studies by Wegner (1994, 2009), cited in Williams et al., (2015), showed that trying to suppress negative thoughts often gave them greater strength. That is why it is important to acknowledge the disappointment that the current loss of volleyball is causing, and not pretend it is something that it isn't. However, rather than suppressing negative thoughts, it is also important to use them as a reminder to re-direct to positive thoughts (Williams et al., 2015).

Turn Positive Thoughts Into Action

Positive thoughts are frequently generated from the world of what you can do. Remember that there are four components to developing as a volleyball player: physical, technical, tactical, and mental. Even though you are currently unable to play volleyball, think of ways you can still develop as a volleyball player. For example, if you have a ball and a playing partner (only someone you don't have to be socially distant from) you can play pepper to work on your basic ball-handling skills. You can connect with strength and conditioning advisors (through Saskatchewan Volleyball, Sport Medicine and Science Council of Saskatchewan, etc.) to work on the physical side of your development. You can connect with current and former coaches to review the key tactical thoughts you need to be aware of when playing the game. You can YouTube volleyball matches and put yourself in the position of the players you are watching, asking yourself what should I be doing/thinking in these situations. You can pause the video action and work on reminding yourself of how you would process a particular situation (e.g., as a setter where would I set the ball and why; as a middle what am I thinking about as I prepare to block; as a corner hitter what type of shot am I going to attempt based on the block that is forming; as a back row defender how am I positioning myself relative to the block my team has set, etc.). You can also work on your mental training. Saskatchewan Volleyball is planning to post a couple of sport mental training sessions in June, July, and August where you will have the opportunity to learn more about how to enhance the mental side of your approach to sport.

Conclusion

The bottom line is be aware of the situation you are in, acknowledge that it is difficult, but then transition your thinking to focus in a positive way on what you have control of. How can you maximize the challenging situation you find yourself in? Be self-aware in asking yourself "am I really thinking in a way that will give me the best chance of success?" and, if you aren't, self-regulate by changing your thinking to focus on the things you have control of to help you on your journey to become the best volleyball player you can be.

Sincerely,
Mark Epp

P.S. Please send me an email at mark.epp@usask.ca if you are interested in more information about these topics and/or the resources that were referred to.