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Mindfulness and tennis performance: A review of literature and practice

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ABSTRACT

Mindfulness practice has grown exponentially in more recent times out of two schools of thought: Eastern Bhuddist meditative practice which has been popularised by Kabat-Zinn and colleagues (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), and a Western approach developed by Langer and colleagues (Langer, 1989). Adaptations of both Eastern and Western practices have been utilised by sport psychology practitioners as an alternative to psychological skills training. There have been some practices that combine mindfulness with psychological skills training when assisting athletes in optimising performance (Baltzell, McCarthy & Greenbaum, 2014). Indeed, mindfulness is associated with positive psychology and wellbeing. The paper reviews some of the literature in the Eastern practice, the practice of mindfulness in sport environments, and will highlight some of the interventions undertaken in tennis.

Key words: Mindfulness Meditation, Tennis, Performance, Awareness, Self-Regulation
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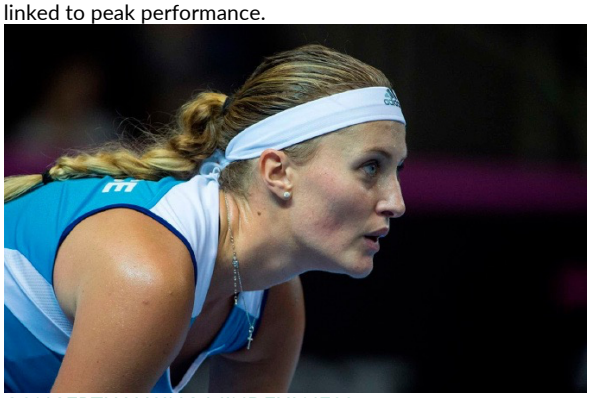
INTRODUCTION

Many athletes will improve their performance through a host of techniques. Coaches, parents and athletes will focus on technique, improved nutrition, equipment changes, and strength and conditioning. This holistic approach also includes psychological skills training (PST) otherwise known as mental skills training, used by athletes to gain a mental edge and achieve marginal gains in performance. For tennis players, being able to concentrate and focus on a task at hand without becoming overwhelmed or distracted, is just one example of when mental skills can make the difference.

Sport psychology practitioners work with athletes to help them optimise performance by implementing interventions that change behaviours and thought processes. Over the years, PST has focussed on cognitive modification, preparing the mind and body for performance. Yet despite this, Thompson Arnkoff, and Glass (2011) discovered that such methods that replace negative thoughts or supress anxiety, may lead to increased frequency of negative thoughts and anxiety experiences, while mindful acceptance is associated with greater psychological adjustment. As such mindfulness training has become widely used in sport performance. Rather than supress thoughts and bodily experiences, players are encouraged to raise awareness of them without accompanying judgement. Some practitioners however, may weave in psychological skills training with mindfulness. Baltzell, McCarthy & Greenbaum (2014), suggest that a performer who is mindful can acknowledge what is unfolding in a non-judgmental way and subsequently select a mental skill that would be most helpful to them.

Guided audiotapes and simple breathing techniques are a form a mindfulness that help an athlete pay attention to the task in the present moment, while changing the relationship to unwelcome debilitative thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations (Gardner & Moore, 2007). The process involves focusing on breathing to anchor in the present, noticing distracting thoughts and remain accepting of them without judgment, and then returning to focus on breathing and the present once again. Being more accepting and aware of the present moment, enables players to change their relationship with the experience and move ahead without being caught up in intensifying negative thoughts, or overwhelming emotions that affect performance. This, mindfulness training is strongly linked to peak performance.



CONCEPTUALISING MINDFULNESS

Much of the literature in mindfulness draws from eastern Buddhist approach popularised by Jon Kabat-Zinn. He defines mindfulness as 'paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally' (Kabat, Zinn, 1994). It entails:

1) Self-regulation of one's attention
2) Directing one's awareness to internal and external experiences,
3) Metacognitive consciousness and
4) Adopting an accepting attitude." (Ivtzan & Hart, 2016)

MINDFULNESS TRAINING PROGRAMMES IN ELITE SPORT

Kabat-Zinn's was the first to operationalize mindfulness in sport with their world-renowned Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) approach (Kabat-Zinn, Bealle, & Rippe, 1985). The intervention named the mental training intervention was used with elite rowers who reported benefit from the training. There is further support for mindfulness training in elite sport environments which includes the Mindfulness Acceptance and Commitment (MAC) Approach in which athletes experienced less anxiety and enhanced

performance (Gardner & Moore, 2004), and the Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MPSE) Program in which athletes reported experiencing more flow (Kaufman, Glass, & Arnkoff, 2009).

More recently, mindfulness training has been delivered in the Mindfulness Meditation Training in Sport (MMTS) in which soccer players reported a changed (more productive) relationship to negative on-field emotions (Baltzell, Chipman, Caraballo, & Hayden, 2014), and better emotion regulation and focus on task-relevant cues (Baltzell & Akhtar, 2014). There is also the mPEAK program in which BMX athletes experienced greater body awareness, attentional control, less difficulty in difficulty in identifying feelings, greater levels of self-regulation and trust, and being more adept at describing and labelling their experience (Hasse, et al, 2015).

MINDFULNESS TRAINING IN TENNIS

Stankovic & Baltzell (2015) undertook a meditation study of masters level tennis players who received MM, and a control group who listened to a tape of moderate coaching tips. MM had a positive affect on performance - MM participants won more than double the number of games, and lost less than half the number of games than the control group. MM participants were also more accepting of performance related anxiety than before, and they experienced fewer negative thoughts than the control group.

Stankovic and Milinkovic (2016) undertook mindfulness training with a 24 year old WTA player who has been playing professional and college tennis for six years. The program involved breath awareness meditation using a guided audiotape. The player meditated 30 minutes once per week, for a period of eight weeks. Stankovic and Milinkovic (2016) reported that prior to the intervention, the player had heightened levels of stress during tournaments due to the pressures of family expectations of winning. Rather than focus on her strategy in match play, they reported that the player would self criticise and focus on what was going wrong, resulting in inability to deal well with failure. Having tried self-talk and imagery techniques, she found that PST had not helped her. Her intentions for engaging in mindfulness training was thus to improve performance during stressful situations of playing tournaments, by raising awareness and acceptance.

Based on the players tournament results and by utilising mindfulness measurement scales, results after the eight weeks evidenced a significant increase in attention and awareness. According to Stankovic and Milinkovic (2016) the player reported being able to compartmentalise emotions, feelings and thoughts. She no longer felt as anxious nor did she feel the weight of others expectations. They also reported the WTA player had won more than double the number of tournaments after the MM than before, and describe that she felt 'so confident'.

Mindfulness practice is not only being introduced to elite or senior players. Practices were introduced by the author to a junior performance tennis player who reported feeling less anxious and more equipped to complete a task, and a club league tennis player was encouraged to engage in a mindful breathing intervention on his commute to a tennis match (Yousuf, 2016). However, more research on the effects of gender, age and playing standard is needed.

CONCLUSION

Mindfulness training increases self-awareness, changes the relationship to an experience, and provides better emotional control. It has enabled athletes in a number of sport contexts to optimise performance. Practitioners integrating both PST and mindfulness training may find that they have more tools at hand to help tennis players find wellbeing, and enjoyment in competition. Mindfulness is being integrated at all levels to enhance wellbeing and performance, and the practice in the game of tennis is growing, with the very best Novak Djokovic, engaging in the Eastern practice.

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