



## MENTAL REP

**The basketball center makes 75 percent of his free throws every day at practice but just 50 percent in games.**

The golfer with an uncanny ability to drain long putts no one expects to fall can only shake her head when she regularly misses 3-footers.

The offensive lineman who almost never has a false start in the first three quarters of a game is flagged time and again in the fourth quarter after fatigue sets in.

The team that has no trouble getting fired up for a Saturday showdown against a conference foe is almost always slow out of the blocks in those pesky middle-of-the-week, non-Ivy League games.

What do all those things have in common? They can be as much about what is happening between the ears as between the lines, in the fieldhouse, or on the course.

Mark Hiatt knows the toll that crises of confidence, flagging focus and motivational issues can take on physical performance. But he also knows those concerns can be successfully addressed, something he does regularly in his role as the Peak Performance sports psychologist.

“One of the common things that I hear athletes talk about is the difference between how they perform in practice and how they perform in games and competitions,” said Hiatt, who is finishing up his certification by the Association for Applied Sports Psychology. “They will say they can do something in practice but there is a shift when they are competing.

“That can speak to some anxiety or distraction that may be out of their awareness but can still affect coordination and timing. There is a physiological impact to emotional tension. By practicing visualization and relaxation strategies they can gain confidence and start to feel calmer, which can lead to improvements.”

Dartmouth women’s lacrosse coach Amy Patton relies on Hiatt’s expertise weekly, if not more often.

“Confidence is so important for athletes at all levels and it can be stripped quickly by one thing happening in a game,” she said. “Where I have found Mark incredibly useful is talking through with the kids what their best game was. What were they thinking about? What were they feeling? What do they remember from that game?”

“Also, what was their worst game from their perspective? What were the triggers that made them lose confidence? For some who are big goal scorers it may be that they are not scoring. So Mark helps them with, OK, what other ways can you get involved? How do you flip that switch? When you can figure out what makes a kid tick that’s your route to helping them get back on track when they lose confidence.”

Lost confidence can be a result of lost focus and it isn’t just Little League right fielders who struggle with that. It can be a problem for that football lineman in the fourth quarter just as it can be for a Division I ice hockey player.

“It might be what they are thinking about between shifts,” Dartmouth women’s coach Mark Hudak offered. “Did you have a good shift or a bad shift and how are you going to react when you get back on the ice? Something we’ve worked on we refer to as the ABCs, the three or four things that if you do them well you know you have controlled what you can control in the shift.

“If you come off the ice and know that you did those things well, then you aren’t thinking about the goal you didn’t score, or the other team did. You are focusing on what you did well. That’s one of the things we’ve worked on with Mark.”

Hiatt, who played the usual variety of sports growing up in the Boston suburbs, was a psychology major at Vermont’s St. Michaels College. After working several other jobs after graduation he returned to school and earned his PhD in clinical psychology at the University of Virginia before doing his internship and a post-doc fellowship at Dartmouth Medical School. It was working with athletes on an individual basis in his role as a counselor at Dick’s House that started to pique a developing interest in sports psychology.

Former Dartmouth softball coach Christine Voigt first tapped him to work with one of the college’s teams. Eager to expand his knowledge and be able to offer more help, he eventually engaged in regular phone meetings with a Toronto consulting group headed by Kate Hays, the prominent sports psychologist who runs The Performing Edge, a practice specializing in sports and performance psychology.

Hiatt has since done graduate-level course work in various areas of sports psychology, performance enhancement and even kinesiology, something he found particularly useful.

“Sports psychology has traditionally been part of kinesiology and physical education,” he explained. “So it was helpful for me to go back and get some of the academic foundations of kinesiology and motor learning.”

Hudak, who like Patton regularly makes use of Hiatt’s expertise, was first exposed to sports psychology when he was at West Point and took a class with the sports psychologist who was working with the Army football team.

“I was able to see first hand that, wow, this stuff really works,” he said. “I think it’s been helpful to get our kids to understand how important this can be, not just on the ice but in other parts of their life as well.”

In that vein, having Hiatt to lean on was extremely helpful for Patton last year when former lacrosse player Blaine Steinberg ’15 died and one of her players lost a parent.

“I’m not sure we could have gotten through it without Mark,” the coach said. “He was our rock. He is so calm and steady. Our kids really trust him because he has such a good way about him.”

Hudak has seen the same thing.

“Mark is just a really nice person and the kids figured that out very quickly,” the hockey coach said. “It was, OK, here’s a person that I can approach.

“I trust Mark. It’s very easy for me to suggest to the players on our team to think about talking to him individually. I know some of the kids have, and I’m certain some have that I don’t know of. As a coach it’s not just about the Xs and Os and what it takes to be successful on the ice. Essentially, we’re talking about life.”

While it is rewarding for Hiatt to see an athlete who was struggling have competitive success and Dartmouth teams win, he takes added satisfaction from knowing the value of what he’s teaching extends beyond the playing field.

“The skills we use in sport and performance psychology can translate to a variety of areas of performance,” he said. “A student-athlete may use the relaxation strategies we use in preparing for a test or an interview.”

Hudak ratcheted up his team’s interaction with Hiatt during the fall, having the squad meet with him every other Tuesday for the first couple of months of the school year. While that became impractical once the season began, he still had the sports psychologist come by practice on occasion to get a sense about how the season was unfolding, and just as importantly, so his players could have casual interactions with him.

“In the early part of the year we talked with him about goal setting and positive self-talk,” Hudak said. “We talked about where the energy comes from, both emotionally and mentally.

“We needed to recognize what we have to do to perform our best by looking at past performances when we worked well, and trying to re-create that environment so we could have that peak performance over and over again. We talk a lot about focus and mental imagery.”

Hiatt’s early involvement with women’s lacrosse centered around improving team chemistry, the approach to big games and visualization. Over the past year or more Patton has looked to him to help develop leadership and to spend time with individual players on whatever they need to improve in their mental game.

He’s been meeting with the lacrosse seniors every week or two and the other classes once a month.

Helping athletes approach both games and practices with the right focus has been a point of emphasis for Hiatt this year.

“We use cognitive, emotional or energy activation strategies to help people get pumped up and focused when they need to be,” he said. “I’ve been integrating these approaches into practice this year to help teams be really focused and committed during practice. With all the demands on the student-athletes’ time it’s important they make the most of the time they have.

“The idea is to be able to bring 100 percent of their focus and attention to every drill when they walk into Boss Tennis Center or onto the lacrosse field. There’s a tremendous benefit to that even outside of competition. Those are skills they will use on a day-in and day-out basis.”

Hiatt knows there will always be athletes, coaches and fans who question if sports psychology is a little bit too new-age. He’s fine with that.

“Everybody has a different level of comfort with psychology,” he said. “Whether it’s clinical work or sports psychology that’s OK. What I try to do if I am working with a team is to present it as, ‘Here are some strategies or some approaches. We’ve got a lot of research evidence that shows this can be helpful for athletes.’

“But everyone’s different. One person might find visualization really helps while someone else may really find more of a cognitive approach helpful. I try to be flexible and tailor the kinds of solutions that make the most sense for that particular athlete and what they respond to. Sometimes people say it’s not for them. That they are not comfortable with it. That’s OK. I try to present it as just more tools to have in your toolbox.”

Hiatt’s interest in expanding his own toolbox was on full display when he put himself through the women’s lacrosse summer running program.

“Let me tell you,” an impressed Patton said, “that’s no easy shakes. The reason he wanted to do it was, he wanted to feel what the kids were feeling. And he’s out there doing it in the heat of summer.

“He was so into it. He felt like if he did it he could understand the team better. Who does that? Who devotes themselves in that matter?”

Small wonder that Patton almost feels as if she ought to get Hiatt his own whistle and a desk in the lacrosse offices.

“We feel very grateful and blessed to have him,” she said. “I feel like he’s part of our staff. That’s how I think of him.” **DP**

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