

Eliminating the “Going Through the Motions” Syndrome: Consistent Practice Intensity

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"We can't take anything for granted. We have to work our butts off every single day."
Dave Taylor, the Kings' general manager on what it takes to win

A major concern faced by all coaches involves their athletes ‘going through the motions’ in practice. No team, professional or minor, is invulnerable to this phenomenon. However, the best teams and athletes consistently get the most out of their practices. The quote above by G. M. Dave Taylor highlights the importance of coming to practice every day with a hard work ethic. To win games a team must consistently put forth the effort in practice. Moreover, to improve skills athletes must consistently push themselves to achieve higher levels of performance. Frequently, the problem is that athletes ‘go through the motions’ not due to a lack of caring, but for a variety of reasons ranging from a lack of sleep, poor team cohesion, and losing sight of their goals. Therefore, the issue of eliminating the ‘going through the motions’ syndrome is more complex than a motivating speech or a ‘kick in the butt.’

So, how does a coach get his or her athletes to work hard every practice? To avoid ‘going through the motions’ practice intensity is needed. Practice intensity is the will, commitment, and enthusiasm to practice with a purpose (Gould, Dieffenbach, Chung, Lauer, Medbery, & Damarjian, 2001). In addition, intensity can be viewed along a continuum where athletes can be over- or under-intensified. Thus, an appropriate level of intensity will lead to the best practices. Accordingly, Taylor (1993) suggests that there are three important aspects of practice intensity including: (1) an ideal level of intensity is needed to play your best, (2) it is a positive feeling, and (3) the optimal level of practice intensity is different for all athletes.

The idea that practice intensity depends on the individual raises serious questions for coaches. It is possible for your athletes to be over-intense and under-intense in the same practice. So, how does a coach run a practice with certain objectives in mind while helping her athletes get the most out of it? Coaches need to be aware of individual differences in intensity. Before moving to the subject of enhancing practice intensity, it is important to understand the origins of a lack of practice intensity. Additionally, it is important to recognize the negative effect over-intensity can have on practice behavior.

‘Going through the motions’ drives coaches insane. Why would athletes come to practice lacking intensity when it is obvious that good practices lead to good performances? Usually it is not intended. Athletes that are suffering from a lack of practice intensity may not be able to tell you the cause. Fortunately, research has provided some insights into this problem. Under-intensity often is the result of poor preparation, a lack of motivation, and fatigue (Gould et al., 2001).

To avoid inappropriate levels of intensity a coach must first facilitate athlete awareness of optimal intensity levels. A good method of creating athlete awareness is to have them recall their best and worst practices. Ask them to focus on how much excitement they felt (i.e., relaxed or energized) and the thoughts and emotions they experienced. The goal will then be to identify factors that positively and negatively influence practice intensity. This can be achieved by using a mental preparation profile, or by having athletes log their pre-practice preparation, in-practice feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, and post-practice cool-down.

Once athletes develop an awareness of their optimal level of practice intensity, have athletes rate that intensity from 1 (flat), to 5 (intense), to 10 (highly intense). It serves as an evaluation mechanism allowing athletes to adjust their intensity appropriately. Also, it gives the coach an idea of the optimal levels of intensity needed by his or her athletes. This allows coach and athlete to use strategies to increase or decrease practice intensity.

At this time coaches should begin the process of determining why practice intensity is lacking. Meet with the team or with your athletes individually to determine the cause. Determining the cause(s) enables the coach to develop an appropriate plan of action for enhancing practice intensity.

When athletes are ‘going through the motions’ coaches have several options for building practice intensity. The option that many coaches rely on is punishment. Frequently, coaches decide to punish athletes by making them sprint, thereby attempting to force more intense behavior. Punishment can intensify behavior, but it can also have the reverse effect. Athletes may withdraw or “tune out” the coach. Although punishment can work on a limited basis, it should not be used too often. Punishment may decrease motivation to practice, create tension, and increase the potential for problems between the coach and athlete.

A more positive strategy coaches can use to build practice intensity is to set team missions and goals. Developing a team mission and goals at the beginning of the season provides direction and focus for the whole season - if it is a central concept in each practice. Writing or posting the team mission and goals in a highly visible area like a locker room entrance wall will keep the mission at the forefront of athletes’ thoughts. In addition, developing a short motto aids in the salience of the mission. For example, the Colorado Avalanche posted the motto “16W” during their Stanley Cup Playoff run in 2001. Coach Bob Hartley kept the athletes focused on the mission with the concept of 16 wins to hoist the Cup, and then posted it in the locker room. Coaches should also reiterate the team mission during team talks. Relating drills or skills practice to the team mission can be a successful method of improving practice intensity. Moreover, five-minute meetings before practice with the purpose of reflecting on the team mission and goals can intensify behavior. Keep in mind that an over-emphasis on outcome goals over performance and process goals can undermine your athletes’ motivation, confidence, and performance.

Team and individual goals should also be set for every practice. As the coach, you can set the team goals and relate them to the athletes. However, individual goal setting will require athletes to commit to the process. Have athletes list their goal for every practice in a journal during a five-minute session prior to each practice. At the end of practice, ask athletes to reflect on the practice and if they achieved their goal. Finally, ask them how they would practice differently next time, if they did not achieve their goal. This process focuses athletes on improvement and intensifies practice behavior. Finally, a coach can keep athletes focused on their goals by developing a “goal board” that is posted at practice so that you can point them out. Research reveals that public goals are more often effective in improving performance.

Coaches can intensify practices by making adjustments to the practice itself. First, infusing practices with fun games that teach skills and tactics can pick up the intensity. Second, practices should be high tempo. Do not give athletes time to stand around and become unfocused. Move quickly between drills, and provide concise instructions. To develop a high tempo practice, coaches should go over the practice plan prior to the session. Also, post or distribute the practice plan before practice while athletes are milling around in the locker room.

A third method coaches use to create practice intensity are game simulations. Athletes want to play the game. Knowing this, coaches should mirror game conditions in practice as often as possible. Closely simulate the game environment during drills to improve motivation and intensity. Fourth, changing the established routine of practice can break up the monotony and eliminate the 'going through the motions' syndrome. Allow older athletes to develop drills or games for practice. Also, coaches can join in a light scrimmage or athletes can be given free time for self-directed practice. Fifth, and finally, allow athletes breaks in training. Over-training will lead to a lack of practice intensity, and burnout. Ask yourself when athletes are 'going through the motions' if it is a lack of focus or commitment, or if it is fatigue and over-training.

To get the most out of each athlete, each practice, intensity is a must. Peak performance cannot be achieved without the will, commitment, and enthusiasm to practice the tactics and skills that make one successful. Help your athletes understand their optimal level of intensity so they can self-regulate it. In addition, when athletes are 'going through the motions' use the strategies detailed above to remove complacency in practice. Keep in mind that 'going through the motions' is often a response to the practice environment and not due to a lack of motivation to play the game. Ultimately, coaches must prepare to minimize 'going through the motions' and capitalize on every second he or she has at practice.

References

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