

Developing Athletes' Smart-Talk Skills

Smart-talk represents our best effort to combine scientific findings and practical experience into a program to enhance athletes' self-talk skills. Smart-talk skills are developed through the same three phases used for other mental training tools: education, acquisition, and implementation. Throughout the process, help athletes remember the self-talk dos and don'ts listed in table 7.2.

Education Phase

In this phase, your athletes should learn about self-talk and become aware of their current self-talk patterns. In general terms, they need to know what self-talk is,

understand how specific beliefs dictate their emotions and behaviors, and learn the difference between positive and negative thinking. They also need to know how to optimize self-talk by programming positive thoughts and reframing lingering negative thoughts. We recommend holding one or two team meetings to provide your athletes with general self-talk information. You should also distribute handouts that highlight key self-talk principles and application strategies. To help your athletes become more aware of their current self-talk patterns, have them complete self-talk logs after practice for several days (see figure 7.2 on page 109) and conduct one negative thought count. The focus of keeping a baseline log is to identify the types of self-talk that help and hurt performance, so that performers can build on their good patterns and change their negative ones.

TABLE 7.2

Self-Talk Dos and Don'ts

Dos	Don'ts
BEFORE PRACTICE OR COMPETITION	
Focus on positive self-perceptions and strengths.	Don't focus on negative self-perceptions and weaknesses.
Focus on your effective preparation.	Don't focus on inadequacy of or problems with preparation.
Remind yourself of previous successes.	Avoid thinking about previous failures.
Focus on positive expectations and goals.	Avoid unrealistic expectations and negative goals.
Reframe any irrational beliefs using effective counterarguments.	Don't allow irrational beliefs to go unchallenged.
DURING PRACTICE OR COMPETITION	
Limit thinking and rely on automated skills.	Don't think too much, overanalyze, or try to make it happen.
Focus on the present, not the past or future.	Don't dwell on past mistakes or potential future problems.
Focus on process, not product, using effective cue words.	Avoid thinking about the product too much.
Appraise the situation as a challenge, and maintain positive expectations and goals.	Don't appraise the situation as a threat.
Reframe negative thoughts, and use effective problem-solving strategies.	Avoid haphazard reframing or unsystematic problem-solving.
FOLLOWING PRACTICE OR COMPETITION	
Attribute success to internal, controllable factors such as effort and mental prep that will increase perceived competence.	Don't attribute success to external factors or failure to stable, internal ones that will reduce perceived competence.
Develop positive future expectations and goals, complete with action plans for how to achieve them, and minimize oversights.	Avoid negative expectations and goals.