

Course Name: Sports Psychology
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Institute Name: IIT-M
Week: 02
Lecture: 05

DISCUSSION ON CHAMPION AND COMPETITIVE MINDSET

Welcome again to another insightful discussion. We have with us Ms. Priyanka whom you have met earlier. She is the first woman psychologist to travel, especially she went with the women's hockey team and she is also into family constellations which I hope we can actually develop on a little. So, welcome Priyanka. Thank you.

Thank you so much, ma'am. Yeah. So, today what we are going to be looking at is - how do we develop a champion mindset. So, I would like to ask you - who do you feel, who do you think is a champion firstly? That is a very interesting question because as I was just saying about who do you think is a champion, I have multiple athletes who are coming to my mind. I am thinking of Federer, I am thinking of Virat Kohli, Neeraj Chopra is coming to my mind, Serena Williams is coming to my mind.

There are multiple athletes who are actually coming to my mind. And it is also what our 400 meter relay team just said, So, no one is born a champion. The reason I wanted to start with who is a champion is we do not know, right? Even with Neeraj, of course, there was always that hope and expectation. But then what he did was he came to the world stage. And what the 400 meter runners said, I think there was this one comment where they said, "kisi ko pata nahi tha, expectation nahi tha" and then boom, look at what they did.

They were phenomenal. I mean, to see them go out there and perform was amazing. It was magical. Yeah, exactly. So, now let us come to the next question of what makes a champion? You can take any one athlete that you want to and we can dwell on that, or the remarkable work that you did with the hockey team because it was really a renaissance period. So, would you like to dwell on that?

I am just thinking about what makes a champion, I feel that there are a team of people who actually make a champion happen. Right? It is the coach who is there, parents and then we have the whole team and the support staff, who really contribute in the making of this particular athlete. Like recently I was watching Carolina Marin's documentary with respect to how she overcame injury and made a comeback. I mean, for me, she is a phenomenal champion. Because the whole process has been so painful, it does not mean champions do not experience those emotions and pain.

Exactly. Yeah. But she was amazing in the way she has made her comeback, with multiple injuries. And she kept her focus in terms of what is important for her to focus on and that is the way. And with champions, becoming a champion is a process.

That is my statement. I was smiling because you said injury. I mean, I am not a champion in that sense. I am just like looking at and you are right, what you are saying about this athlete and also even if you look at a lot of our own athletes. Especially Neeraj's journey, Neeraj Chopra before his Olympic medal, he had a shoulder injury as well.

So resilience is what you feel? It is such a key component. Absolutely. And becoming a champion is also in terms of how do you cope with adversity? Yeah. In terms of how do you deal with all those setbacks which happen in your life and you still keep moving forward.

Yeah. And an athlete's career is not just filled with all the highs and all the medals. It is also filled with injuries. There are also other issues which happen. Yeah. They have their relationships, they have their friendships and they go through every single thing just like a normal individual.

Along with that, going out there and performing is something. It requires a different level of spirit.

Yes. I mean, even what I remember with Virat, just that one year lag and not that he wasn't performing but just because there was no century to his name and then of course there was unfortunately a couple of ducks but how people write you off, right? I am just glad that Neeraj's journey has been consistently upward. Yeah. But I think, when we take a team sport, let's say cricket or hockey, they just put on a pedestal and they pull down. And dealing with that shadow, in your lows and coming back, I think that really to me, makes and is a champion.

If you actually look at the women's team also, in Rio they were 12th. But right now in the Tokyo Olympics they came 4th. I mean, there was a lot of process that happened.

Yeah. And that 4th was almost like our gold, right? It was amazing. Yeah. And I love how you touched on, it's a field, a group of individuals or, this supporting staff including the parents, including maybe the sponsors and the rest of us sports science professionals because what happens behind the screen I think very few people know. They just know that, oh, okay, fine Neeraj won a gold or hockey won a bronze or this one did, but that consistent support is so paramount. And in psychology we have what is, the field theory, who is that group which supports you and who are you going to keep your focus on because there are also going to be a lot of people who are going to pull us down.

Yeah. And Priyanka, if you could give us an example because we know you're into family constellations and you beautifully bring the two worlds together. So does anything come up to you in terms of, maybe an athlete where, you worked with that aspect to empower the athlete? I would say that, I've been, I mean, there are multiple athletes, but I think this is one thing that I want to talk about. This one athlete has been feeling so anxious, every time she goes out there and performs because she really doesn't want to disappoint her parents in any way. The love for her parents is so much that she doesn't want them to feel sad with her performance at all.

Yeah. But then I think even talking to them about it in terms of what kind of support I want from you, how do I even want you to express your support so that I don't feel pressured has been so difficult. So I think in the sessions, it's all about making the parents understand how important they are, for the system of athletes and how important their role is, especially for the development and the performance of this particular athlete. I think that is so important because, be it the parents or be it the coach or be it anybody, without anybody, I think the performance can be extremely difficult.

I remember there was one particular student in my class who was narrating this example and it was so beautiful. He said that, you know, I was working with the parent and I mean, of course, the parent was able to notice that every single time the parent is cheering for the athlete or she's getting disappointed, the athlete is getting affected quite a lot. So she decided that I'm not going to be there at all. So let my child go out there and play. But even with that, the child still did not perform even when the parent is not present. So it's like even when the parent made the conscious decision that I will not be present so that he doesn't get pressurized, it did not work. So what I'm saying is it's so important that the parents support and

their presence is so important and how they can support and be present rather than feeling that, if I am not there in the system, my child is going to be fine. That doesn't work at all. It's very interesting what you're saying, because it's one of the challenges for me, has been really to get through to the parent that, knowingly, unknowingly with the right intention, you could actually be hampering your ward.

I very well recall one example which is a little opposite to what you're saying. But, it was such an anxious parent that when he was there, she would shrink. And she said in the session that, I think it was the dad, she said, I really feel pressured, but it's also so sensitive. How do you actually tell it? And then he was also this very, very anxious man. And it really does need a little bit of convincing because they're mirroring. You're the primary support system. And I also think what you said is very right, because it's also not just about being there and not being there. The internal parent is there. What you've been growing up and what's been told to you as a child. And the messages that you hear from your parents are always there within the athletes.

It is especially that this chunk that we're describing, discussing about it's very important, I like to get parents to the first session or at least when I used to work a lot more with parents and you understand the dynamics. So you could be doing all the right things, but the underlying message is if you don't trust in the ability of your ward, it could even be 25, 30 years old. That's the message you're giving.

Thank you for bringing that. And absolutely. And without the primary important support system, it is very difficult for us to expect that athletes can become champions on their own because, they start at a very young age. They put in so much of hard work, and parents also contribute greatly for the development of athletes. I think we very well know in terms of, P V Sindhu or Saina Nehwal, every single person has contributed their success to their parents being there.

Definitely. I want to also bring in Phelps' example that, apparently he was diagnosed with attention deficit. But the mother, got him into swimming coaching. And initially, there was a little bit of difficulty with Bowman, his coach and him coming together. But then see what we got, right? so I think, really trusting in that process. So it really is about the process. Yeah.

I want to ask one final question in this section, which is what do you really feel about certain belts? I know quite a few people have asked me this, okay. Because you look at Haryana athletes or let's say, down south for us, let's say Coorgi's. We have Sakshi, the Phogats, Neeraj,, then in Coorg, we have a lot of the

hockey players, Robin Utapa. So, the role of culture and certain belts, do you think there's something there? Definitely, I do think like with the athletes that I have worked with, I have seen the difference in terms of how they handle pressure situations, the ones who are in the north, and compared to the ones probably from the south, I do see that kind of a difference. But what I've also seen is how they can communicate with each other.

And when the coach comes in, and he builds in a process in terms of how I want the communication within the team or within an individual athlete, how that helps in building a champion mindset, because they end up having like, team champion mindset. Yeah. So that process, I mean, of course, whichever place they come from has a huge influence on how they handle the situation that is definitely there. But even the coach's role.

Yes, definitely. Yeah, undoubtedly. The only reason I was asking was mainly because if you see a lot of the wrestlers and combat sports are coming from the North and a lot of the runners are coming from the south, especially the Kerala belt, it could be P. T Usha, a lot of the Judokas are coming from the northeast. So there seems to be, which is I think people are beginning to explore and let's see what comes but yeah, it's very interesting. And I'm guessing with what you said, also the mindset of the coach from certain belts also could play a role. So what does it mean to have a competition mindset? We hear this word a lot, Let's just try to tease it out a little bit. What do you feel? what's your first thoughts about it? So I am only thinking about this one particular athlete, who is coming to my mind when it comes to competition mindset.

So, with this particular athlete, he had back to back competitions the same day. And in the first competitions, I saw that, he was feeling extremely low in terms of his confidence. And he did not know he was becoming extremely small. He was hunching. And during the break, we both were having the conversation and I was like, what do you think is happening? It was the same issue happening in every single competition.

I asked him, what do you want to do now? What do you want to do about it? You very well know what the problem is. And how do you want to handle this particular situation? And this was in a competition. And basically, he said that, you know what, I don't want to go out there and play this way. And in the next competition that I saw him, he just took charge of how he feels, how he's going to think and there was so much shift in his body language.

He became so confident. It was such a joy to actually go out there and watch him. And he ended up winning a medal. So I think that for me, competition mindset, again is taking charge.

Also what you're saying is, it's also, what I hear from you is your athlete took charge and also because we see that sometimes, they'll blame it on all sorts of things. But he took charge and went, this is not how I want to be, which sent a message of how I want to be there. And that seems to be a defining moment in, right now, what is happening is every single time, he reflects back on that experience. He remembers that, I've done it there. I can always do it. I don't want to have to be stuck in that phase every time.

Yeah. Precisely. I mean, if you go back to flow state for a minute, that's what it is. It's about, I know. And also about a champion is, how am I pushing myself? You know, how am I challenging myself? What's that one little step? This is a question I ask athletes. What's that one little step you can take today to touch your zenith? Awesome.

That's a wonderful example. So what do you feel about the role of routines? We hear a lot of pregame routines, rituals. So what do you feel about that? I think it really helps because what I've seen with athletes is, since the time they wake up or probably even the previous day, they have certain routines that they end up following. And of course, when they wake up, they want to do certain rituals.

They want to do certain things. Some of them want to pray. Some of them want to exercise for some amount of time. Some of them want to listen to a particular set of music. There are multiple things that each athlete feels that is important for him to do.

I remember hearing Rahul Dravid saying, he would like to go for long walks, let's say tomorrow's the tournament like this evening, because that really opens up your mind. And he would say that in India, it's really not possible, because you're going to get thronged by people. And I also think what's important is, this was a question I remember, one of the young tennis players asked me, ma'am, should I go out and party? Should I go out or shouldn't I go out when we're with the team? And I'm like, what do you feel like doing? And also, what helps you? Like if, sitting in the room, you're psyching yourself negatively. Is that helping? But then if you go out and you're not feeling okay. So, you know what helps and then also knowing that there is a particular routine you follow, which then gives a message to your brain that things are normal, things are fine. So, I think that's what we're trying to understand with routine.

Some teams also have slogans. If you look at some of the rugby teams, they also want to scare the opponent. So that becomes their routine that they do before the competition.

Oh, I love that. What's it called? Haka. Yeah. My God. It was beautiful. I remember playing it during one of the teams I was working with. There was this very young boy who joined. So the video was about him. But just that energy you feel. Because, I actually had an athlete, an Indian Olympian who said that I would go scare the opponents.

Ah, okay. Okay. So then I said, but is there a need? And he said, no ma'am, but that was how I would psych myself, so it's awesome. I mean, of course, he said it like after he'd finished. So you don't want your opponents to know. And I think what you said is also beautiful because when I feel centered and I am fully in myself, in my zone, the message I give out to the opponent is - I am ready.

And I think that is so important for a competitive mindset. We know of so many athletes, like for example, Abhinav Bindra, I think in his autobiography, he has actually spoke in terms of, how he would idealize people, the ones he would compete with. And then he felt that this approach is not going to help me. I need to look at them as competitors. Exactly. Yeah. So I think that is so important, especially to have a competition mindset. I worked with one of the swimmers. I actually spoke about it in another section where he felt he couldn't beat a record because it was an Indian swimmer.

I think that's what it is like. It's really about knowing that you're there because you deserve to be there. And to work through these unconscious patterns is when it becomes very, very important. Absolutely. Yeah. I was wondering about Djokovic's comment, where he said, don't beat yourself about being in the present all the time.

Yeah. Yeah. So what do you feel? Because we tend to see athletes. It's difficult because our mind keeps wandering. There's so many thoughts which keep coming all the time. I mean, it's very difficult to actually practice presence. To be in the present is extremely difficult and it requires practice. And, the more you're going to be critical, it is going to be working against being present.

Yeah. So I think to develop competition mindset again, you need to be extremely compassionate because you are going to have your wins, probably in your career. I think there'll be more losses than wins. Yeah.

So I think how you support yourself, how you actually encourage yourself, what words do you use towards yourself? Exactly.

Your self-talk. Your self-talk. So important. Yeah. And I also think a phrase I like to use is, we're all in the process of becoming Buddha because athletes are so self-critical, there's already enough people judging you, pulling you down and pressure. There's no need to feel more pressurized. I really like that. And I also liked what Djokovic actually said, you know, in terms of, to recognize that you've gone off, come back.

Yeah. Because I think it's impossible, and especially in today's world and also with the competition, you're probably going to go in and out. And let's especially something like tennis, something like golf, which is longer. Yeah. I think it's very, very essential to go, okay, what brings me back to my present? .

So Priyanka, I love that first example you gave and I was wondering, when we see a particular athlete, or let's say we've had a session just before or, a major tournament. Can you kind of gauge, is this guy or is this girl ready? What are the parameters you actually use? And then how do you work with it? I think one is, of course, the language that they use. Some of them speak in terms of, oh, I'm so excited. And some of them are unsure. Yeah. They feel that, oh, I don't know how it's going to be, it's not such an important tournament. The language that they use gives a lot of indication in terms of how ready they are. Yeah. Yeah. Because I know of some athletes who, first of all, , are ready for any of the competitions. Yeah. Be it a small one or be it a major one, I think our Virat Kohli comes under that.

Yeah. He loves and he just loves challenges. Yeah. Yeah. And I remember one of these athletes, very, very popular athlete in India who told me that to become a confident player, you need to be a confident person. I totally love that statement. Yeah. He said that you need to know how to go out there and handle anything that comes your way. And that is what I go out there and do. Yes. Yes. I thank you for bringing this in because this is something I think we try to, put into parents' heads, especially because Indian parents, it's about you overcocoon your child. I really want to bring in this example of this very young tennis player.

Okay. And he was a prodigy doing exceptionally well and all. And the first session, okay. I gave him to read something and I think there was a little bit of reading issue or something, but the minute it gets tough, he is like, oh, I can't. And I'm like, it's okay. Just get the gist. And the history with him was as far as he's leading, he's perfectly fine. But the minute he wouldn't, like the minute the opponent even starts

coming back, he throws the racket away, literally and the game is gone.

Yeah. And then when you trace the history, they were over cocooning him. Okay. So, what you're saying is right. So, you know, what you are, and that's something even I tell athletes that what you are outside the court is as important as what you are inside. Absolutely. You know, you can't be like two people. Of course, there's certain image you carry, there's certain role you put on when you come into a competition zone.

You don't stay in that full time. But what you are really influences what you do. And I've seen that, you know, those who feel that who can handle anything in their personal life, they are amazing even on the field when any new situation, unpredictable things end up happening on the field, then they're just there. I know that I will be able to handle it. Yeah. And there's certain players, you know, and what you said about challenges.

I think we can wrap up this session with that, and something that I always ask athletes is, how are you going to challenge yourself today? Because, sport is unpredictable, just like for that matter, and any minute, any challenge, so you have to get prepared. So the more you challenge yourself, the more you're going to keep bettering yourself, and then you know, it doesn't come as so much of a shock.

Yeah. And I think at the end of this session performed exceptionally well for KKR. And the way the kind of confidence and the kind of competition mindset that he went with, he felt like a champion, probably, I don't know what he thought of, because they just had I think they had to score 29 runs.

I think so. I don't know the exact details. But it was phenomenal. It was so unpredictable. But what he did for the team and the kind of mindset he went with. This is amazing. So I guess building on that team energy also becomes very important.

I think it's wonderful. I mean, of course, the leagues and younger players coming up, it's really brought a different kind of challenge for youngsters to really make it at the big stage. So yeah, so great. This is really amazing. And I hope you all got an idea with this, what is it to develop a champion mindset. It is a process like the flow state.

But then, it also aids you, you have your, how do I stay in this zone? So thank you. Thank you, Priyanka. Thank you, ma'am.

