

Course Name: Sports Psychology

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Institute Name: IIT-M

Week: 01

Lecture: 05

Becoming a sport psychologist: lessons from the field Sport psychology- working with coaches

Welcome to this insightful discussion. We have with us Mr. Santosh, Santosh Nagarajachari. He is the founder and chief coach at Golden Ace Shooting Academy, which is in Bangalore. I am extremely happy and grateful that you are here despite your busy schedule. And also with Santosh, I think I would like to add that he is a very relational coach.

He has worked with state, national as well as international shooters. And I work with him through Nudge Sports. So, it makes it even special to have a coach who I have worked with, to discuss about certain aspects which are so important when it comes to understanding sports psychology. When I began my career as a sports psychologist, the focus was always on athletes.

But I think the more I learnt working with the coaches, there was so much learning. I realized that it is so important for sports psychologists to learn about the coaches philosophy and how they actually train, what is their vision, what is their objective, because that really gives us an insight to work with the athletes. So, before we move forward, my first question to you is, I know you come with a CA background. You are a chartered accountant by profession and then you got into the field of coaching. So, tell us about your journey as a coach.

My journey as a coach is always started with being a teacher. So, I still remember in my younger days, I used to pick up all the boys from my residential area and teach them how to play cricket. Try to compete against the bigger guys. And while doing so, I used to take them every week. The weekdays we used to train and weekends we used to have matches.

So that systematic way of working was always there in the head and the teaching part was always ingrained inside. So apart from that, then I started moving on to teaching subjects as I progressed into my career of professional career. And then I started teaching work.

So teaching was always part of me. So that never left.

So that translated into teaching of shooting when it happened. And the big difference between teaching and coaching as I see is coaching is a step ahead of teaching. You actually try to push the athlete to their potential. As a teacher, you are giving a skill that is non-existent. As a coach, you are trying to push the athlete to his potential.

So the transition between teaching and coaching was a little easy for me. Maybe because of all the teaching background that you come with. That I did undergo myself. So my philosophy has always been grow. So you continue to grow because you look at any competition, be it cricket has reached its pinnacle today.

You know the kind of game that happens, basketball amazing. You get the game, the strategies and the game that they play today is phenomenal. Football has reached, even kabaddi. In fact, I was just watching the league games and the players picking and somebody went for more than two crores. So that means the amount of load that brings on the athlete is also high.

Absolutely. When they are getting such kinds of opportunities. So because the competition and the event is always growing, as a coach and as a person involved in the sport, we also need to grow constantly. So which involves learning, adaptation and delivering results. So another important aspect of this philosophy of grow is repeating. Repeating the hard work.

Yeah. Continuously keep repeating the hard work because we believe repetition is mother of all skills. Absolutely. And opportunity, whenever you get an opportunity, you seize it and you always play to win. Right. So that's the best philosophy I think.

And it has delivered good results for me as of now and for the students. And more importantly, I think it's a structured way of thinking, which does help us a lot. Absolutely. And I really like the philosophy that you come with. You're saying that grow is one of the philosophy.

You want to grow as a person. You also want your athletes to grow and move forward. I just want to bring in this other question. Like sometimes I know that your own players may be going to other coaches also. Maybe certain times, right? If they are excelling at a very high level, maybe there are different coaches who can take care of them.

How does this growth really help them? The whole point being the ultimate objective has to be the athlete has to perform at the top level. Absolutely. Now there might be certain

lacunas in me as a coach. I might not be able to see certain technical challenges that my athlete is facing. So nothing wrong in approaching another coach.

So similarly, whenever we have problems, we do approach psychologists or whenever we have problems in physical inabilities, we do reach out to our physiotherapists. So similarly, reaching out to another coach in the same field is definitely worthwhile at times. And there could be, you know, there are people who have a better influence at the game. So you never know if you find a person who can influence your game a little more. So it will definitely be an advantage.

And I don't think working with another coach should come as a should be looked at as a problem or it should be looked at as an opportunity. Yeah. And that is something that I really like, you know, about what you are saying that it is such a growing and learning opportunity again to learn from, you know, another person and another coach and probably even from the same field. And you are also thinking about, you know, how the athlete can grow and move forward and how you can also learn from the same process. So a good example would be, you know, it cuts down a lot of wastage of time at times.

You know, I've looked at kids who come from school days then to move on to college. And college has a very negative impact on their mindset. Too many friends, too many new habits and too many new things to attend to. So when we tell this to new coaches that, you know, this is what you're going to face in the next two years with your athletes, you know, if they listen to us, it's good for them. You know, we didn't have that kind of handholding when we started out.

Absolutely. Because nobody told us this problem you will face when you start out. And we have to go through that whole process. You know, it doesn't make sense. So having somebody to talk to and sharing experiences, this is at a very low level. When you look at really taking the athlete to the highest potential possible, then you definitely need that kind of sharp minds who can, you know, nudge you also along.

Yeah, absolutely. So we might somewhere fall short at times. So I always tell that, you know, we are not 100% perfect. So it's just an opportunity that we are getting there, which we can actually explore that, you know, potential which, you know, we have not thought of yet. Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Some perspective from outside always helps.

Yes, yes. And another thing, Santosh, is, you know, most of us generally think, especially people from non-sporting backgrounds may end up thinking that the role of the coach is only coaching. But that is definitely not true, right? Because there are so many other things that you do as coaches. So the reason I am asking you this question is also because

there are so many people who are interested in sports sciences, there are people who are interested in sports psychology. I think this is going to give them a little bit of clarity on what are the roles of the coaches.

Correct. So I have listed down a few points, you know, in terms of the roles and responsibilities, which every coach has to go through. So one is the main major point, you know, straightaway to start out with, we would be ensuring learning. So that's the major role of a coach. So he has to ensure that learning happens throughout the year, the entire calendar year learning is happening.

So that's the primary goal. The second thing is maintaining discipline in training. So that comes from the coach, it doesn't come from anybody else. I strongly feel this point. Yes, of course, athletes have to turn up to the venue to actually train. So without athlete, you're even turning up, we can't do anything beyond when they actually turn up, what do you do as a coach? Right.

So you need to have things planned much earlier in advance and things ready for the athlete to follow. Does discipline also involve something like, you know, they need to be regular in their training and what are you going to do to ensure that regularity? Is that also part of discipline? Partly yes, both ways, it does work both ways. One is, you know, giving that encouragement so that the athlete comes back. Right. I know I've seen and heard about a lot of coaches who they are so strict that, you know, students fear going back after certain bad performances, you know, they take break couple of days, they find excuses.

So I say, you know, it's OK to fail. It's absolutely fine to fail. So create an environment that the athlete is very comfortable coming back and discussing what exactly the problems were or at least what they thought were. Because most of the times, you know, when it comes to psychological issues, challenges, especially in terms of delivery and competition. So students might not assess their performance very objectively. So their assessment might be very different.

But if you're very, you know, if you are going to counter that in a negative way, then the might not open up. So there is a way of discussing things and, you know, allowing things, you know, for them to be very comfortable in terms of coming back and training. So creating that kind of an environment, positive environment and creating trust in the athlete. So that's another major role the coach has to play. Because if we are not going to build that trust over a period of time, and the trust is not going to come just because we are open to the athlete.

There are certain actions we will take on behalf of the athletes, sometimes defending them

against their parents, sometimes, you know, issuing letters to the colleges telling that I need this person to be in training here and backing them up. So sometimes when they have failed to back them up telling that no, we know I stand behind you, I'm very sure you can do better. So these are small, small things that work in favor. And next thing is to listen to athlete. I've seen a lot of people not listening to athletes.

So when athletes open up about various points, the athlete, the coach should not limit himself to only the coaching or technical aspect of it. Certain times just to give a ear to, you know, giving a lending a ear to the problems that athletes are facing, probably at their home or elsewhere, college, there might be a ton of problems they are going through. So just allow just listen to them, you might not need not give a solution actually. It just happens, you know, sometimes they just let it out, burst it out and they become better.

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Sometimes I have to just listen to them. And one of the one of the major challenges is preventing problems from occurring in advance. Absolutely. That's a bigger role of a coach. So you know that next month, this event has lined up and these are the problems that you know, your athlete is going to face.

So suddenly what you can do is you know, you can preempt that tell the athlete that see, this is how you need to plan your schedule this entire month ahead. So kindly, if there is any changes that if you're going to skip a few classes to let me know, so my performance during this match or competition season is going to become very important for us. So accordingly, you know, planning that and preventing any problems from arising. And on top of it, there's a lot of chaos coaching is a lot of chaos dealing with a lot of chaos.

Absolutely. Through this chaos, keeping your focus on the goal that this athlete has to deliver at that level. So through this chaos, you maintain that focus. So that is the real goal of coaching and the roles and responsibilities of coaching as far as I see. Yeah, yeah. And I also, you know, at least through my experience, I've also seen that, you know, at least in some of the academies where players are staying far away from their parents, you know, coaches are also taking on the roles of being a parent.

Yes. Right. It becomes like I have seen sometimes where, you know, one of the coaches I was interviewing. So parent was like, you know, my child does not do homework, please tell him to do homework. So all these things are also, you know, somewhere, even though it is not part of your sporting role, it ends up becoming a part of the coach's role because somewhere the athletes end up listening to coaches more than the parents. Even that ends up happening sometimes, right? It is a combination of things, you know, when the teenage hits, obviously parents are no more the go to people for children, they don't want to go to parents. And so obviously coach becomes the first person to go to for parents more than

children

again.

So all the ranting of parents come to the coach. So another point being here is, you know, the way in India, the larger picture of coaches painted is categorized into the guru category. The moment you say guru, now the entire character based improvement is the responsibility of the coach. So that is why, you know, please tell my son or my daughter, you know, I see her wasting too much time. Why don't you advise her? No, I don't tell her not to waste so much time, not to watch so much mobile.

So it does become a challenge in terms of parenting. We also fall into that trap of parenting a little bit. So how do you like distinguish that role? Because sometimes I know it does happen even to us, where they're like, you know, it won't come just to sports psychology of working with athletes, it does come to, you know, make sure that this discipline is there, you know, make sure that he doesn't watch his mobile, etc. So how do you like detach yourself and, you know, kind of draw the boundary that this is not coming under my role? It becomes very simple at some point of time, maybe earlier, earlier in the initial days of coaching, we all go through this problem. And we all suffer from, you know, overdoing things. And eventually at some point of time, you do realize that, you know, there are certain aspects to the game that you can control.

And there are certain things you cannot control of the athlete. At the moment he goes to the goes reaches home after the training and after you know, let's say you've given him 10 tasks, he's completed 10 tasks. Now he's going to sitting and watching his mobile. Now I don't know what to do.

So at some point we have to learn to let go. So letting go that that's the key here in terms of, you know, accepting a level of performance and sticking to that. So if you stay as long as we are sticking to the goal and things are working fine, the other aspects, that means it's not really affecting. So then there will be certain things that you will be able to foresee. Let's say somebody going to one or two attending one or two parties might not be affecting his game today. But if that becomes a habit every Friday, every Saturday morning, you're seeing that person turning up late.

So obviously, you know, something else is going to come in your way. And you also come up with solutions in terms of how to deal with it. Yes. One is learn to deal at our own level.

Then at the athlete level. So first thing is to accept that, you know, at certain point of time or at certain age, an athlete is bound to be influenced too much from the outside world. So at that point of time, you need to control in terms of, you know, first advice and then

be patient. Wow. I think, you know, you're talking about so many life skills that the coaches need to have.

Right. Because one is coaching is such a challenging field. And I think with all the things that you've spoken about, it, you know, coaches are, it's not like coaches are not susceptible to mental health issues. So there are so many things that coaches also go through. They have their personal life. Like in your case, I know that, you know, you run your academy at the same time, you know, you also are into coaching.

So it builds up much more challenges. And at the same time, you know, parents have a certain expectation that your children have to perform at a certain level. So basically, I think one thing through this discussion, I also want to bring to your notice is that if you feel as coaches that you do need help, reach out to the right kind of people and speak about whatever is bothering you and seek help because, you know, like the way you said, it is also about knowing when to seek help and, you know, making it as an opportunity to learn from somebody else. I think seeking help is something which is extremely important even for the coaches to do. True, absolutely. So the real challenge is, you know, there are two ways of two sides to this one is the lack of commitment on the coaches side.

When you see when you when they become a little desensitized in terms of what is happening. So they struggle with their own problems. And they don't know when to when exactly to seek help. So they become a little desensitized in terms of performances of their athletes. And then it becomes a little more problematic in terms when you look at the athlete not turning up on time and not not being disciplined.

Now these are two different sides. One here, the coach himself is not performing top notch. But here the athlete is not performing top notch. Sometimes it's a combination. Sometimes it's independent situation. So in this, you know, you will see a lot of coaches struggling during this phase.

And it's just a cycle throughout the year. You know, the emotions are not the same. We are all charged up as coaches, you know, OK, this is what we need to do. And suddenly after six months, then you would see a dip in because, you know, all the students are off or many things happening. Competition performances, if the performances are good in competition, the coaches also really motivated the performances down.

And again, the coaches motivation is a little low. Absolutely. I think you're bringing up such an important point, like, you know, how self motivation is important and working on your mental health as a coach is an everyday thing. It's not something which happens like in seasons. No. So what happens is emotions varying throughout the season is common.

But we taking care of ourselves and our own mental health is something very important, very, very important, which we need to be consciously working on on a regular basis.

It's not something that I will say, OK, when I'm down, I look at something and I'm very happy. I'm OK with it. No, it's not going to happen. Absolutely right. Because things can build up over a period of time and then burst into something really major.

Correct. And you don't want that to happen whenever the peak competition is. So the coach is the person who is holding a lot of things together when things are not working for an athlete. Right. He's he's totally dependent on you in terms of to bring sanity into the game. So the athlete knows he can perform really well. Let's say an athlete who's top notch and you know, the entire team is dependent on him.

Or let's say if it's an individual sport like shooting, you know, he knows that his potential is to win that competition, national championship or Asian Games or something. Now problem is he is going undergoing a different level of emotional turbulence. Yeah.

But, you know, sometimes the performance is hit and miss. Sometimes it's very good. So at that point of time, it is the coach who brings sanity into the game. Right. He is the person who tries to keep the emotion at a level. But the coach himself is not really well behaved at that point of time or is not a person who is able to control his emotions through the tough phase.

So it will affect the athlete a lot. So eventually it's a loose, loose, loose situation for everyone involved in it. True, true, true. And one of the things, you know, I think that you as a coach might have noticed and even I as a sports psychologist, this is something that is commonly, you know, I mean, these are the common issues which come to us. One is in terms of, you know, players perform exceptionally well in the practice.

But however, in the competitions, they don't really perform that well. So what do you think are the, you know, reasons as to why this happens? This is a more common phenomenon in an individual sport. Whereas a team sport, you know, yes, you but it's not so obvious in a team sport that, you know, somebody else covers up for your mistake or somebody else perform better or there is a luck factor. But in individual factor, this is very obvious to see the difference between practice and a match situation. In practice, they're doing really well in matches, the performances are dropping. So peak performance in practice does not necessarily mean their ability to convert that in a match.

So that means the person has not trained himself to execute the same level of skill in a match situation. So match situation varies because of expectations, squarely the burden

of expectation, right? So what happens is if the athlete is walking into the arena, into the match, telling that, you know, this is my score, this is what I'm going to do today for their success in Asian Games at that point of time, and being mentally prepared for the challenge. So a lot of people fail to mentally prepare themselves for the challenges of the competition. So that is where the performances in practice will not translate into matches.

So the whole idea about how I'm going to be throughout emotionally stable the match. So that is what is going to tell them how to define their success in the match. So another thing is the burning desire to win. If you see a match, so many any competition if you take, they start off at let's say fifth position, they may go to second position, they may be leading at sometimes and then suddenly they'll go to fourth position, then third position. See this is an emotional roller coaster right now.

Now throughout this, the burning desire to win has to be there. Because the match situation can keep changing at any given point of time. Absolutely. Till the last shot is fired or you know till till the last last ball is done, you don't know what is going to happen. Like the result is not yet out.

So that means you're going to fight for it till the last, you know, minute. So that burning desire to win throughout that game is also going to define their ability to translate their practice or their skill into matches. So last and important point is fear. Fear of competition.

So this is something that a lot of people hide from themselves. They say, Oh, I am strong. I am okay. I know I'm ready for this. I know how to do it. I can deliver this. But the fear something they've hidden from themselves, a truth that they have not spoken about themselves to themselves is what is going to come back again.

It's again linked to expectation, burden of expectations. So person is extremely prepared. He's done his training well. But that fear is there, which is hiding it rather than facing the fear, telling that, OK, I'm going to face this fear. Fear is real. You know, I would rather say threat is real, threat of losing a match due to these things is real.

But fear is a choice. So we make a choice at that point of time. So athlete can decide very easily in terms how I will handle myself. If there is failure, you again come back and rework with it. If you succeed, then it probably becomes a template to replicate it in more matches in the future and succeed.

Okay. Yeah, absolutely. And another question is, when it comes to sports psychology, there are certain skills which we tell the athlete, is extremely important, be it with goal setting or be it with imagery or basically the kind of communication, self-talk, etc. So you

know, and these are the skills which are also important in coaching, right? The psychology of coaching. So basically, do you use these in your practice? Yes 100%. So every time we get an opportunity to implement whatever we have learnt in terms of from the psychologist or from fellow coaches or wherever we have learnt it from, we do love to implement every aspect of these techniques into our coaching. So the mental aspects, when you look at it, what are really growing is presently is to learn to cope up with the stresses of the competition.

True, true. Yes. So that is the biggest challenge right now. And because every any sport you pick the number of entrants into the sport is growing. Absolutely. So look at badminton, there are so many look at shooting, you know, there are more than 1000 shooters in nationals, then basketball you look at it, you know, just walk into one ground, you will see so many kids practicing simultaneously. So that means the competition is ever growing.

So how to cope up with the stresses of new entrants and competition becoming tougher and tougher. So I think it is a process of elimination where, you know, good coaches elevate themselves with these techniques and you know, the average coaches would remain. True, absolutely. And my other question is, you know, as a coach, I mean, psychologists and coaches really have to work together, what are the qualities that they really need to work together? So first is common goals. So the psychologist as well as coaches need to have common goals, common goals in terms of bring the best out of the team or the individual whom they are working on.

So that common goal keeps everything going really well. So beyond that common goals, you know, what would really help is acknowledge that the other person can deliver better in certain areas. Right? As a coach, I cannot deliver 100% on psychological front because I have certain limitations. Now if a student comes and tells me that I have this problem, I'm not able to deal with it mentally. So as a coach, if I accept that problem, right, it becomes a challenge in terms to hand over that responsibility to that person. Let's say a very good bowler, a coach knows his ability to bowl really well at the end of the match close to the, you know, in death over he bowls really well.

Let's take an example. Now suddenly what happens is if the person is telling I am unable to deal after two losses, you know, the person comes and tells I am unable to deliver at this death over. So coach might not give him that opportunity at all. So there cuts his potential, thereby cutting his potential. So coach cannot accept the limitations of athletes. Whereas when directed this towards a psychologist, psychologist can definitely sit and deal with those demons in the head and tell no, you know, couple of bad matches does not mean your ability is lost.

So psychologists can deal with that and they can bring them back in a better mental shape. And coach can again give that responsibility and say, come on, now let's do this. Yeah, I think it brought in such an important point in terms of how, you know, playing by the strengths is so important. True. And they have to complement each other.

The psychologist as well as a coach without complementing each other, it's not going to work. Yeah, absolutely. And be clear on the larger picture. At the end of the day, you know, you work on something, I work on something, but it's not contributing to the larger picture. It doesn't make any sense. And I think that communication is the key, right, for us to work together and discuss and see how we can actually help the athlete, you know, perform.

True. And also achieve the particular goal. True, very true. And how do you implement, let's say the suggestions based on assessments or, you know, certain sessions that the psychologist ends up giving you. Like, you know, how do you implement that in your coaching practice? For me, it becomes a little more, you know, helpful in terms when I get certain advices in terms of how to handle situations, it becomes really easy because, you know, we would be discussing so much about the game, right, with the athlete. Our main job is to focus and discuss everything about the game, but that we have totally cut off from the other aspects the athlete is going through. So now when the psychologist spends sufficient time with the athlete and brings those value additions into the game, suddenly it does occur to us in terms of, okay, so at a particular situation in a match, maybe these techniques can be applied and then suddenly, you know, you can see a different outcome.

Okay. So that way, you know, you should look at it in terms of, you know, how I can assemble that into my own strategies. So if that can happen, it will be really amazing. And that is bringing the best out of the athlete by two separate individuals working on a common individual and getting the best out of them.

I think this is perfect. It really sums up, you know, how we really have to work together. We really have to work for the common benefit and goal of the athlete's performance and also like, you know, in the process, everybody has to take care of their own mental health. Correct. So it also becomes a big responsibility of coach to defend a psychologist in terms when it comes to parents and other places, you know, other element, because the psychologist always judged very fast.

Yeah. The result, they want the result to come very fast. And that is not going to happen unless the athlete has turned a lot of pages. Right. Here, the majority will see. I think you brought in such an important point because if the performance doesn't happen, it is the psychologist.

First is the psychologist. The second is the person who gets hit first because coach anyway has to physically still deliver. He has to be still in the ground standing like this, what is happening? But same thing is not true with psychologists. Now even psychologist is sitting there watching the match and trying to assess.

There's nothing much you can see. So the first hit is always at the psychologist. Absolutely. Absolutely. So it also becomes the responsibility of coach in terms of, you know, to choose his psychologist well and also to protect, draw lines and also to protect. At the same time be honest with the parents or, you know, the people management in the team, telling that, okay, see the psychologist doing the job. And but the athlete is not being very honest about it. So that becomes a biggest challenge, I think, for if it is a game, then coaches can easily decide what the athlete is performing, whether he is giving you 100 percent or not.

Psychologically it is very difficult. Sometimes coaches get a sense of this. So at that point of time, you know, putting it across to the psychologist and to the athlete telling that, see, you are not being very upfront and honest about it. It is for your own good that you need to do this. So it will work that way.

So that way I think coach has a little larger role in terms of, you know, protecting his team. Yeah, absolutely. I really appreciate what you said, which is very important and essential. So with this, we have come to the end of the discussion. Thank you so much, Santosh, for all the inputs. It was, I think some of the things which have come forward are like, you know, how it is important for the coach to grow.

And it is important for the coach to also take care of his mental health. And at the same time, you know, learning from other coaches is important. Also learning and working with the psychologist on the common mission and vision and working towards the larger picture and also supporting the psychologist. And at the same time, vice versa is something, it is something that is phenomenal from this discussion that we have had. So thank you so much, everyone. Thank you. Yeah.