



SPORTS HYPNOSIS IN PRACTICE

SCRIPTS, STRATEGIES
AND CASE EXAMPLES

“This book hits a home run!”

Judith E. Pearson, PhD

JOSEPH TRAMONTANA PhD

*Sports Hypnosis
in Practice*

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Introduction

I like to postulate that some types of hypnosis or self-hypnosis must have been used back in the days of the Roman gladiators, or perhaps even earlier. How else could someone enter an arena with a lion and contemplate his impending demise without at least being able to disassociate to some extent? I also muse as to how in those days this activity was seen as “sport” in the eyes of the emperors and the viewing public, but a life-or-death experience by the gladiators themselves.

The psychology of sport is becoming an increasingly popular field of study and practice for psychologists. Two recent books are James Loehr’s *The new toughness training for sports* (1995) which has a foreword by Chris Evert and Dan Jansen (Loehr has worked with many other famous athletes) and Jack Lesyk’s *Developing sport psychology within your clinical practice* (1998) which includes a brief discussion on relaxation training (pp. 65–66), which he refers to as “a sort of light hypnosis.” William Morgan has a chapter on hypnosis in sport and exercise psychology in Van Raalte and Brewer’s *Exploring sport and exercise psychology* (2002).

I had the opportunity to chat with Dr Loehr following his Keynote Address at the Association of Applied Sports Psychology (AASP) Annual Conference in Providence (Loehr, 2010). As CEO and Chairman of the Human Performance Institute in Orlando, Florida, he works to enhance performance with corporations and military special forces, as well as athletes, but the techniques he employs are similar across all groups. He said he had moved away from using hypnosis as a technique with athletes because he did not want them to feel that he was the one in control of their improvement. He agreed, however, that my focus on training the athlete in self-hypnosis helped to negate that concern.

At the 2010 AASP conference there was not one presentation on hypnosis in sports in four days of lectures, symposia, and workshops, although I did hear a speaker make a perfunctory mention of hypnosis for relaxation. However, I found it interesting that this group – a cross-section of psychologists, sports counselors, exercise

physiologists, educators, and so on – talked about many of the same techniques I use albeit without the use of formal hypnotic induction or self-hypnotic training. For example, they discussed relaxation, concentration, mindfulness, focus, centering, visualization, and a great deal about imagery. Many of the presentations dealt with mental skills training (they referred to it as MST), which to some extent incorporates these same techniques as well as others such as goal-setting.

At one of the social events, I met a sports counselor from New York. When I told him about this forthcoming book, he exclaimed: “You have scripts? I need them!” When I suggested he could wait a few months and buy the book, he responded: “I can’t wait that long. I need them now!” This encounter served to reinforce my thesis that sports hypnosis is indeed a specialized form of sports psychology.

A number of university psychology departments now have specific training in Sports Psychology, and the American Psychological Association (APA) has a membership division (Division 47, Sports and Exercise Psychology). There is also the Association of Applied Sports Psychology, with over 1,500 members, and the National Institute of Sports Professionals (NISP), as well as other organizations for sports counselors. The *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* caters to research in this area and Routledge/Psychology Press has a catalog of titles in the field, as does Human Kinetics, the latter describing itself as “the information leader in physical activity.”

In a recent review by Schwartz in the APA’s *Monitor on Psychology* (2008), she reports how psychologists are increasingly being called upon to help Olympians improve their concentration, focus their skills, and cope with the intense pressure of competition at such a high level. She reports the responses of 11 psychologists who are involved in this field. Margaret Ottley, for example, who works with the US Track and Field Team, reinforces those skills athletes already use, including breathing techniques, positive self-talk, and sensory awareness. Colleen Hacker says that with the US Field Hockey Team, she relies on performance-enhancement techniques such as imagery, focusing, distraction control, and pre-performance routines. She attempts to aid them in being their best more often and to play their best when it counts most. Other respondents in different events gave similar descriptions.

In an article from a recent American Society of Clinical Hypnosis (ASCH) newsletter titled "Report from the president's desk" (Fall 2008), Wark wrote about the First World Congress on Excellence in Sports and Life held in Beijing, China in August, 2008. He noted that the conference brought together mental trainers from sports, business coaching, education, and health, all of whom were interested in the application of hypnosis as an aspect of mental training. All of this is noted to point out the increasing popularity in the field.

Experts from various theoretical backgrounds talk about the significance of our beliefs and the mental models or mindsets that shape our behavior (see Bandler & Grinder, 1979; Dyer, 2004; Ellis & Harper, 1975; Meichenbaum, 1977). It is generally accepted that we act and perform in accordance with the beliefs our minds tell us are true. Many of the affirmations presented on pages 153 to 160 suggest that if you think something is not possible or out of reach, you're probably not going to invest much energy toward attaining that goal. To unlearn old self-doubts, we must substitute new, more productive thinking. The management by objectives approach employed in industry suggests the following three steps:

1. Identify the specific goals or results you desire to achieve.
2. Then create and develop actions (objectives) that will accomplish those results.
3. Determine the methods (steps) necessary to achieve these objectives.

So if you want to achieve your goals, you must create a mindset consistent with beliefs that support the truth you want in your future (hypnotherapists refer to this as "future projection" or "age progression").

As will be shown in this book, it is important for the hypnosis practitioner to be familiar with the basic tenets of sports psychology so that he or she can adapt these strategies to hypnotic presentation. I have been using hypnosis and hypnotherapy since 1978 for a wide variety of applications including smoking cessation, weight loss therapy, and other addictions such as alcoholism and problem drinking, drug abuse/addictions, and pathological gambling (Tramontana, 2008a, 2009a). I have also used hypnosis for pain control during surgical procedures (Tramontana, 2008b), as well as many other areas in which I have not published, including lowering subjective pain with chronic pain patients, decreasing anxiety,

Chapter 2

Golfers

Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass.
It's about learning to dance in the rain.

Vivian Greene

In the first draft of this chapter, I made the following statement: "Let me begin by noting that I have never worked with a champion or so-called elite golfer. I have, however, worked with golfers at many levels, including professionals, one of whom made the LPGA qualifying tournament, and another played for a couple of years on an Asian tour, and all of whom reported improved performance following the experience. This fact is likely to be especially pertinent to those golfers who are not professional, much less champions, but good enough to aspire to go professional or even to get better and to achieve peak performance while continuing to play at the amateur level." Since then, however, I have had the privilege of working with a young girl who won a world championship in her age group. This experience has been quite delightful because she is so motivated, dedicated, and insightful, and has the ability to generalize the techniques I have taught her from the golf course to the classroom.

Before getting into the specific techniques I use with golfers, I will present four case examples.

Case 1: The professional golfer

The first athlete I ever worked with was a professional golfer. He was referred to me in 1984 by a mutual acquaintance who was, in fact, one of his supporters and paid for his sessions with me. Despite the fact that this case was some 25 years ago and all of the files in my Mississippi Gulf Coast office were lost in Hurricane Katrina, I remember him well. His sponsor had given me a copy

of Timothy Gallwey's *The inner game of golf* (1981), which I quickly read before the first session. The client told me that in every tournament qualifying round, he would do fine until the last hole or two, then he would "blow up" and miss the qualifying cut by one stroke. This reminded me very much of what Gallwey talks about regarding athletes creating their own obstacles to achievement.

The first session focused primarily on introducing him to hypnosis and relaxation training, as well as deep breathing methods, with suggestions on how to generalize these techniques for his golf game. In the second session, I felt it important to use hypnotic regression to uncover what was causing him to break down just before qualifying. He was regressed to his most recent tournament to review what thoughts were going through his mind just before the final hole. What came out was very interesting. He said that his sponsorship had basically run out. He had no funds, and he knew that if he qualified, he did not have enough money to even stay in a hotel and buy meals during the rest of the tournament.

What followed was not part of psychology or hypnotherapy! I called a good friend in New Orleans who was always very interested in golf and is a good amateur player, and who is now a committee member for the Zurich Classic in New Orleans. I explained the situation to him, and he arranged for my client to go to New Orleans and play with some of his businessmen golfing friends, who wound up sponsoring him for a while. We had another two hypnotic sessions during which I attempted to hypnotically reinforce some of the concepts I had learned from Gallwey's book. All the while, I explained that my focus was not on the mechanics of his game, which he already knew and whatever tweaking of which would be done by his golf coach, but the mental aspects. In his next tournament competition, which was a small, local one, he not only qualified but won first place money. He later gave me a few free golf lessons, and the next thing I heard was that he was on the Asian Tour.

As this experience was so long ago and I had no paper records, but I wanted to include my first case of using sports hypnosis in this chapter, I tracked him down recently. I explained that the reason I called was that I would like to include my work with him in a book and wanted to know if he felt the hypnotic experience had helped, and if so, how. One of the first things he said was: "My biggest

mistake was not staying with you a little longer! The best I ever played was after we worked together a couple of times. The first few tournaments after that were the best I ever played! I had a 74.1 average in 1983 and 1984 and lowered it to 71.6 in 1985 and 1986.

He said that in the first tournament he won after seeing me, he remembered he would play a round and then “wake up” after the last hole: “I was focused on hitting the ball and then totally forgetting golf. You told me that whether the shot was good or bad, to focus on something else; the water if near an ocean, the trees, or birds. Anything but golf! I remember finishing several strokes ahead of the field on one round and not remembering the round because I was so focused.”

I had learned this advice from Gallwey (1981). He describes how in tennis, a player is hitting a moving ball over and over again on the run or a skier is hurtling down a mountain, so their reactions are much more instinctual than mental. The golfer, however, has more time to think between shots. If the previous shot was a bad one, this thinking can involve grappling with self-doubt, anxiety, fear of failure, and tension. This difference is similar to the distinction between working with sprinters versus distance runners, as will be seen in Chapter 3. In most sports, too much time spent thinking about a good shot can also distract the player.

He added: “Back then, unless they were on the PGA Tour, few people could make enough money to survive, even on the Asian Tour.” In 1987 he met a girl from Jackson, Mississippi, quit playing, got married, and started working as a golf pro, then began selling real estate, and is now a stock trader. He said: “It was tough quitting. I wish I had stuck with you longer.” He then asked if I had watched the US Masters the previous weekend, adding: “Several of the leaders melted in the last two holes. They could have used your help!” The April 20, 2009 issue of *Sports Illustrated* featured an article by Alan Shipnuck entitled “Last man standing.” The author discussed events and twists at the end of that Masters that led to Ángel Cabrera’s victory. Interestingly, on the cover of that edition the strapline read: “The Masters: Angel and the Bedeviled.”

In his (2009) article Hodenfield notes: “In the nerve-wracking game of pro golf, Nicklaus’ method – which he talked about openly – was to do the very best he could against the course and

Chapter 8

Tennis

You have to have the desire to achieve, to do better and do more and continually do, do, do. It's an insatiable desire to not only win, but not to lose.

Serena Williams

I had not previously worked with a tennis player at any level, although I hoped to do so in the near future. However, Coach Tony Minnis, the women's tennis coach at Louisiana State University (LSU), was gracious enough to grant me an interview for this book. He also coaches the Southern 18s (high school seniors, juniors, and sophomores who are prospects to play at the college level) in the National Team Competition sponsored by the US Tennis Association. Since the interview, I have worked with one of his varsity players; the case example follows the interview below.

JT: *One of the major premises of the book is that I don't have to have had experience working with athletes or playing certain sports, as long as I have some input about what are the key mental concepts his or her coach is trying to instill. Since I have not worked with a tennis player, I thought you might be a great resource to help me understand the mental side of tennis. When we talked briefly on the phone yesterday, you seemed to be very deeply into the mental side of tennis.*

TM: *Well, I think tennis is the quintessential sport that involves the mental side, similar to golf, but even more so. As a coach for 19 years and as an athlete – I played at a high college level – the consistency I have seen in kids that succeed is between the ears.*

JT: *Between the ears?*

TM: *Yes, I tell people all the time that when I recruit for tennis, I look at results. You can have a kid who is slow, not as gifted as some others, but if they are really tough up here (points to head), that's what I want. You*

can have a kid who is 20th in the country and another who is 60th, but evaluating and recruiting for tennis is different from football, because in tennis it's head-to-head competition. I think that my team for next year has the physical tools, but do we have the mental toughness to get us there? It's a sport where there is no substitution. When you're out there, you're out there. So if you read much about tennis, you will read estimates that tennis is about 85 to 90 percent mental.

JT: *You described tennis as "the ultimate individual sport." I was thinking in terms of tennis being a fast-moving sport. Like with running, there is a big difference between sprinting and distance running. Sprinters have little or no time for negative self-talk, whereas distance runners have lots of time for that. I thought tennis was so fast moving, but you said something on the phone about 20 to 25 seconds between serves?*

TM: *Oh, it would blow your mind. In tennis, more than any sport, there is no doubt that there is more negativity that goes on up top. I talk about this over and over. I videotape my players to show them the body language they show after a bad shot. It is so obvious they get down on themselves. Take John McEnroe – you get kids who buy into that negativity. They get caught up in it. Getting frustrated and letting their emotions flow. I have rules like you can't throw your racket. When you're playing tennis, you have 25 seconds after a point to the next serve. So we're talking about keeping focused so you don't get caught up in the negativity. You would be shocked if you came to a match or a practice and just observed the body language. It's hard to see it on TV because of the cameras. But even the pros, if you watch them close up, you will see them get down on themselves. In an average match, you probably play 140 points, and during that time, maybe you win two and lose one, lose one then win two – it is up and down and up and down. And for the coach, when the negativity kicks in and you lose several points in a row, probably the comment I've made most in my career is "Let it go, and let's get to the next point." The kids you deal with in tennis are usually well off and they're used to having their way, and when things don't go their way, they don't necessarily handle it well. We deal with kids whose families have spent \$30 to \$40,000 dollars a year on lessons. As I was coming here, I was talking to a very good friend of mine, and he was saying, let me know how it goes – he's got a daughter who is in tenth grade. So I think there is no doubt in my mind that for tennis purposes, what you're talking about is very important in how kids can let go of the negativity.*

I told Coach Minnis about my experience in my first sports hypnosis workshop, just as I described it to Coach Girouard in Chapter 7 regarding locking in good shots and flicking away bad ones, in order to focus only on the next play.

TM: *That's interesting. So how do you get them to focus? What are some of the methods you use?*

JT: *Well, I use hypnosis and teach them self-hypnosis to practice at home. It basically involves getting them to relax and concentrate and focus on whatever you, as coach, are telling them in training. And if there is negative self-talk, I need for them to tell me what that's all about and then I give them positive suggestions to counteract or reframe the negative. I tell the distance runner who is saying, "What was I thinking entering this distance race, I'm basically a sprinter?" to say, "Wait a minute, I'm a fine-tuned machine, I've been training for this, I'm in great shape. I'm a tough dude!"*

I also shared with the coach some of my experiences with other athletes such as golfers, including the one who had previously worked with Dr Rotella (see Chapter 2) and a volleyball player (see Chapter 9). I also mentioned to him the movie, *For Love of the Game*, and I was impressed that he was familiar enough with the movie that he quoted the verbal self-hypnotic instruction, "Clear the mechanism."

TM: *Tennis, more than any sport, involves negative self-talk. When I was competing myself, I'd fight the negative thoughts with "positive, positive, positive." And it's hard to explain this to the players. I tell them "push yourself mentally," which means to push the negative thoughts out and think positively. But it's a different time in terms of quick fix medicine, quick fix everything. It's hard to get them to focus on the journey and not just immediate results. I've coached for 19 years and find that the kids' lack of patience and lack of perseverance is worse than it was a few years ago. When things don't go their way, they have a really tough time handling it and they let it affect them emotionally. I find a difference in the "disconnect" too. I coached men in the past, and I find that guys can bounce back faster while with the girls, it just gets worse.*

JT: *I've been reading about Wimbledon and how a lot of the high seeds are losing to much lower seeds. Do you think a lot of that is mental?*

“An excellent read for sports psychologists, sports therapists and lovers of sport. Techniques that work are all backed up by a wealth of experience.”

Aaron Surtees, Director of City Hypnosis

This highly readable volume provides new strategies and scripts for hypnotherapists, sports counselors and sports psychologists working with athletes to help them achieve their peak performance. A major premise of the book is that the therapist does not necessarily need to be familiar with an athlete's particular sport or activity in order to serve as his or her 'mental coach'. The athlete is instructed that the goal is not to improve the mechanics of their performance (that is left up to their coaches) but, rather, to help them to relax, concentrate and focus so that they fulfill their maximum potential. They learn not to let the mental side of their game trip up the physical side, but rather to enhance it.

There are also chapters on returning from injury and addictions, which are often important factors in athletes' careers. The book contains a number of case studies from a variety of sports where the author has worked successfully with athletes. In the case studies the author notes how surprised he was to learn that many clients have a vivid memory of the techniques he taught them, indicating just how important these techniques were to them.

“Highly readable with excellent case examples, hypnotic scripts, treatment strategies, and verbatim interviews with coaches and athletes.”

Judith E. Pearson, PhD, Licensed Professional Counselor, Clinical Hypnotherapist, Master NLP Practitioner/Trainer and author of *The Weight, Hypnotherapy and You Weight Reduction Program*

“An excellent book on the practice of sports hypnosis. He has cited the top people in the field of sports hypnosis and I am sure that all of them will be making this book required reading for anyone interested in using hypnosis with athletes.”

Mitch Smith, LCSW-C, DAHB

“Anyone serious about hypnotic sport psychology will insist on having this book in their library. Taking the information in this book and individualizing and tailoring it to the sportsperson actually sitting in front of you will garner great results!”

John H Edgette, PsyD, co-author of *Winning the Mind Game* and Director of The Milton H. Erickson Institute of Philadelphia, USA



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