

THERE IS FREQUENTLY A LACK OF CONGRUENCE BETWEEN THE ATHLETE'S CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS MOTIVES: A REVIEW

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It is not uncommon for an athlete to set a record and subsequently be unable to replicate his performance or even come close to it for that matter. This sometimes occurs despite the fact that the athlete verbalizes his willingness to “do anything” in order to achieve his previous level of performance. There is, however, frequently a lack of congruence between the athlete's conscious verbalization and his unconscious motivation. This particular point of view is illustrated in one of our recent hypo analytic cases which will now be summarized (Morgan, Nagle and Ryan 1972).

The athlete was a 21 yr old college distance runner at the time of the evaluation. He had previously established a school and conference record in the 3 mi run, but he was unable to match this performance or even come close. Indeed, he was frequently not even capable of completing races. The athlete's coach interpreted his failure as reflecting a lack of desire and willingness to “put out”. The athlete on the other hand felt the coach was not offering him the necessary instruction to regain his previous performance high. At any rate, the runner was willing “to do anything” to perform well once more. The runner was examined by the team physician and found to be perfectly healthy. There was no medical explanation for his poor performance. He was next examined by an exercise physiologist and found to have a maximal aerobic power of 70 ml/kg which compares favourably with the aerobic power of distance runners and marathoners described by Morgan and Costill (1972).

The runner's previous record performance in the 3 min run was calculated to have taken place at about 96% of his maximal aerobic power. While others have noted that runners can work at such a percent of maximum in similar races, such performance across a 3 mi course is obviously demanding to say the least. The runner's psychological profile suggested normality in all respects. He, however, possessed the characteristics of the world class wrestler to a greater extent than those of a distance runner. He was extroverted rather than introverted and scored high on hypnotizability. Subsequent session revealed that he was capable of entering a deep trance during which he could age-regress to earlier periods.

Under deep hypnosis the athlete was age-regressed to the day of his championship performance and requested to describe the entire race. He was able to visualize this event quite clearly, and after a very short period he began to experience “pain in the side” as well as respiratory discomfort. He explained that he could not continue the race because of the intense pain. It should be recalled that he was running at about 96% of his maximum capacity. Just as he began to terminate the race a group of his teammates appeared and exhorted him to “kick”. He explained that he could not let his teammates down, and he was therefore able to continue and the pain was no longer noticeable. The pain returned later in the race, however, and he again

decided to quit the race only to experience a double-visual hallucination on the horizon consisting of two television sets. He was depicted on one set as if the race were being televised (it was not), and his parents appeared on the other monitor. They, in turn, were thought to be viewing his run on their own television set. He was unable to carry out his plan to stop because of these “complications” and within a short period of time he felt as though he was in vacuum. He could not feel any wind resistance, nor could he sense his feet hitting the ground. He described the conclusion of the race in which his chest hit the tape as being a very “weird” experience.

The runner elected to have posthypnotic recall for all of these events during the waking state. When asked if he cared to continue with the program of “insight training” he responded that he would prefer to give the matter some additional thought. He subsequently elected not to continue “insight training” (hypno-analysis). Presumably he had gained the necessary insight he lacked earlier. His running did not improve, but his understanding of his inability to replicate his previous record apparently did. That is, the record race was extremely painful, and he had apparently repressed this experience from his conscious awareness. This repressed perceptual experience was “replayed” during hypnosis, however, resulting in the athlete electing not to continue delving into the matter. Of course it would have been quite simple to construct “cognitive strategies” during hypnosis with an aim toward dissociation of pain during running competition in the waking state. Since the athlete did not wish to pursue such avenues, however, “the case was closed”.

Implication: a significant discrepancy may exist between an athlete’s stated desires and his “actual” (unconscious) attitude toward record setting performance.

Conclusion: the coach and physician must look beyond the athlete’s past performances and current conscious verbalizations. The essence of “failure” is best understood within a psychobiological framework which relies upon such specialties as sports medicine, exercise physiology, and sport psychology.

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