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# THE IMPORTANCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAINING FOR THE ATHLETE’S AND THE ARTIST’S PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE

Case  
study

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## Abstract

*In the present paper we focus on the athlete and the artist, who are selected according to their physical, psychological and artistic abilities in order to perform high quality professional activities. The athlete’s and the artist’s psychological training are aimed at achieving professional **success** (the term **success** is used in the sense of outstandingly good result). As we have found common elements in the psychological training for both domains, we have tried to emphasize the common ground they share, in a process of transfer of specific means (specific exercises) from one area to the other. In a practical study, we demonstrate the importance of the psychological element within the general training for those practising these professions (arts).*

## Theoretical Support in the Actor's and High Performance Athlete's Psychological Training

The origin of success must be sought within the human being, within his abilities. The actor's and athlete's abilities are a prerequisite, the necessity for these abilities is qualitative to a greater extent than quantitative. The hereditary faculties, talent, have always been a controversial issue in both sports and the dramatic art. Each person can have access to a certain sport or to the theatre. Most people, however, admit that, in order to initiate and train a highly performing athlete and/or actor, the first requirement is to discover the candidates' abilities, which will subsequently be the subject to appropriate training programs, as any individual faculty of the athlete (fitness, imagination, intuition, spontaneity) or of the actor (sensistivity, agreeable appearance, a communicative nature, a rich imagination etc.) must be cultivated in the spirit of the rules of sports or arts (drama), of the competition or of the stage respectively, through exhausting exercise and practice.

Ion Cojar, the professor in dramatic art, stated that "talent is the innate ability to actualize one's potential which exists in a dormant state in human individuality" [Cojar, 1998]. Talent is manifested in a number of characteristics of which the most important are considered to be the following: exceptional hereditary endowment, optimal state of health; high quality general and specific abilities; above average intelligence; a strong and balanced type of nervous system; high motor observation, execution and creative ability; a permanent need for accomplishment, self-independence, domination, and self-confirmation. The manner and degree of realization of these fundamental characteristics of talent with a view to achieving success presupposes an appropriate educational framework, which should also contribute to the development of a strong long-lasting professional

motivation. However, the term **talent** is often used ambiguously since there are many things you can learn and others that can only be spoken of as an innate ability. If someone has talent and the instinct to think in theatrical terms, when they have the opportunity to exert themselves, their talent will be shown to endure – or not. There are many talented actors and athletes whose talent is wasted as they do not act according to it and are only left with that innate ability in the same stage as when this ability was first discovered.

Inspired by the ideas in *The Sociology of Success* [Ralea & Hariton, 1962] we see that at the basis of quality sports competitions, as well as the basis of the dramatic creative process, lies the athlete's/artist's wish for achievement and self-realization always aiming for success.

## Views on psychological training in drama education and in sports training

K.S. Stanislavski and later Jerzy Grotowski have studied the artist's acting, the dramatic phenomenon and its significance, the nature of the physical and psychological processes involved. K.S. Stanislavski was an inspiration for many exceptional authors in world drama, some of which are listed here: Michael Cehov, Lee Strasberg, Viola Spolin, Eugenio Barba. The two authors created exercises for the physical and psychological training of the theatre actor which have become models for the drama schools to the present.

The psychological elements are present in most specialised literature for drama; however, the volumes focusing on the actor's psychological training especially are relatively few. By comparison, sports have the science **Sports psychology** which is rooted, so historians say, in the ancient world, when the inter-relation between the **mind** and the **body** was recognized. This relation lay at the basis of the practice devised by K.S. Stanislavski and his disciples.

One of the main researchers in sports psychology was Coleman Griffit, an American psychologist who was the first to do research in this domain over an extended period of time at the University of Illinois, thus helping the coaches to improve the athletes' performance. In this area, he wrote many studies regarding the improvement in the athletes' performance by means of psychological training. While the research in sports psychology progressed, applied sports psychology is not much employed in high performance sports, with the exception of the sports clubs in the U.S.A., which offer high quality psychological training aimed precisely at high performance sports. Otherwise, the psychological component of training seemed very much ignored in high performance sports in the rest of the world.

The American John F. Murray, with a Ph.D. in Psychology and Sports Psychology, considers that the state of Sports Psychology as a science was in 2009 not very far from that in 1965, the year when "the first world congress in sports psychology was held" [Epuran, Holdevici & Tonita, 2008], when the first academic articles on this science were published: "It is still considered to be a science in its initial stage, a profession shrouded in mystery and ignorance, since there are few persons qualified and specialized as psychologists in the domain Sports Psychology who can offer their clients psychological training for sports and general psycho-therapy. [<http://www.johnfmurray.com/index.php/tag/mental-coaching>]. To help an athlete or a team, thorough knowledge and practical experience is needed in the area of sports as well as in that of Sports Psychology. Obtaining qualifications for this profession is neither easy nor fast; only a graduate with determination and a good professional orientation will have the opportunity to get a specialization in both academic disciplines.

One thing is certain: psychological training is indispensable to the athlete who

aims at a successful career in sports. Many Romanian athletes of international standing train in sports clubs, most of them American, where they find genuine support in mental training. It is true that research in Sports Psychology in our country is making efforts to implement the best options in the athletes' psychological training, but the reality of the last years' results does not quite rise to expectations. We thus intend to suggest researchers in Sports Psychology some of the current models in the actors' psychological training. We should not forget that, on identifying the need for improving mental training, Mihai Epuran, the Romanian specialist in Sports Psychology, stated that "any means which can bring the slightest progress in training and performance should be made use of" [Epuran, 1968].

At present, we weigh psychological training in these two domains by taking into account the opinions of two educationalists: Michael Cehov and Mihai Epuran.

We consider that Michael Cehov offers a genuine form of "psychological training" when compared to the other elements of training, which could be compared to the athlete's psychological training.

This is how the two educationalists argue in its favour and emphasize the importance of psychological training in theatre and sports training respectively:

To **Michael Cehov**, three prerequisites are crucial in professional performance in the theatre: [Cehov, 1930]:

- 1) The body's extreme sensitivity towards creative impulses. This sensitivity cannot be achieved only through physical exercises; such exercises, however, combined with psychological training, can induce the organism to become a good receiver of images, feelings, emotions, impulses. The body's expressiveness should not be fettered and limited by non-artistic influences such as cool, analytical, materialistic thinking. To avoid this, the

actor must systematically accept the task of “feeding” the body with artistic impulses, refining it, making it more sensitive and receptive, for the actor’s body should be shaped and recreated from the inside. **Michael Cehov** considers that the development of psychological sensitivity is extremely important in the training of the modern actor. The author claims that an individual “self-psychology” should be developed.

2) The richness of self-psychology. A sensitive organism and a rich psychology complement each other, creating the harmony between the body and the mind, which eventually helps the professional actor achieve his goal. This harmony can be achieved by means of psychological/mental exercises meant to develop the use of thinking, imagination, sensations. For instance, one goal is intuiting the thinking of certain characters from various ages, with no modern influences in their thinking, understanding their lifestyle and the circumstances in which they lead their lives. The same exercise applies to people around us, people with distinct natures and temperaments. Thus, the capacity to analyse gestures, thoughts, words, situations as close as possible to the existing ones, is acquired.

3) The actor’s full subordination/mastery of his body and mind. This is the method by means of which the actor can become his own master and can create the background for the development of talent. In everyday life, the actor does not make full use or adequate use the body’s muscles, which can become inflexible and insensitive. With this in mind, Michael Cehov created a set of exercises devised specifically for the actor’s physical and psychological being, insisting on the awareness of each movement and sensation.

In **Mihai Epuran’s** view, psychological training is necessary for the athlete because:

1) “In his activity in training and competition, the athlete’s entire personality is involved. In the absence of conscient participation, of thought, passions, interest, without the strain of the will, the intense work necessary for training and competition is not possible. It can be said that in the human being’s entire activity, the psyche, the conscience has the leading role. That is why emphasis should be laid on educating the main particularities of the intellectual and psychological, emotional and volitional processes and of the individual’s distinctiveness. They all contribute to the correct reflection in the athlete’s brain of the circumstances in which he finds himself and acts, helping him to choose the best solutions.” [Epuran, 1968] We can notice that the Romanian author emphasizes the need for awareness of each inner action and process and on the fact that physical exercises are not enough to train the athlete for high performance. We can also detect the idea that the beginning of training, in the case of both actors and athletes, should begin from the inner side with the training of the psychological qualities.

2) Psychological training develops the athlete ability to govern himself in various circumstances and with various opponents. In other words, it is the very “richness of the self-psychology” that Michael Cehov was speaking about; this “richness” gives the athlete the possibility to choose and use the most efficacious strategies at the key moment of the competition.

3) A correct and adequate psychological training creates in the athlete the ability to summon the physical and psychological resources. This brings us to the third condition stated by Michael Cehov which must be met to achieve high performance in theatre, namely that the actor must be the master of his psyche and body. We find the idea of the necessity that the mind and the body should be a unity and that

practising should be continuous in order to preserve a balance between the two.

4) Psychological training is a factor which directly contributes to an increase in the quality of performance. It contributes to forming the correct technical and tactical skills and creates the necessary climate for obtaining the best results.

In *The Athlete's Psychological Training*, Mihai Epuran expresses his opinion that success, high quality performance in competition, are most often triggered by the quality of the athlete's thinking, feelings and volition [Epuran, 1964], while Michael Cehov considers that a delay in thinking is reflected in a delay in acting of the various body segments, of the voice or of the entire body [Cehov, 1930]. The relation between **thinking** and **action** can be re-balanced through special exercises, which Michail Cehov recommends in his course.

## Experiment

In order to render meaning to the relation between **thinking** and **action** supported by some of the authors mentioned above, we organized a workshop at the Faculty of Drama within the "G. Enescu" Arts University of Ia i, where drama students and high performance athletes from the Ia i Schools' Sports Club attended. The topic was: An exchange between the psychological training in arts/theatre and sports. The experiment lasted for three days; the drama students and the athletes were involved in activities based on concentration, mental visualisation, the repetition of sentences, attention games, various role plays related to well known characters. The athletes played their favourite character roles, while the actors were involved in sports competitions. The participants from each domain had the chance of finding out what it is like to be on the stage or in the sports arena.

The athletes of the club were given a booklet with special mental training

exercises extracted from the courses of the great theatre specialists K.S. Stanislavski and Michael Cehov, and the athletes offered the actors guides for physical exercises for general physical training.

In support of the "Contribution of psychological training in theatre and sport" concept, we have applied a questionnaire to a group of drama students in the 2nd year (12 students) who had been initiated in the training technique of the two great drama professors K.S. Stanislavski and Michael Cehov.

### Drama 2nd year

1. What do you think about playing a particular role as compared to the 1st year after reading the courses based on the ideas of the authors: K.S. Stanislavski, Michael Cehov and others?
  - a. I am certain of what I have to do and I can improvise in difficult moments;
  - b. I am more confident
  - c. I feel the same
2. Do you think that exercising psychological abilities should be practiced in parallel with the physical abilities?
  - a. always
  - b. sometimes
  - c. never
3. Have you felt the effect of mental training through games, breathing exercises and meditation?
  - a. very much
  - b. we manage self-control
  - c. I have not changed my reactions during acting
4. How often do you do psychological/emotional training?
  - a. on a daily basis
  - b. three times a week
  - c. once a week
5. Do you think that emotionality can influence an actor's performance?
  - a. to a great extent
  - b. only if you are very emotional or shy

- c. I do not find it applies to me

In terms of the athletes' training, we have asked the help of a specialist in sports psychology. We implemented a two-month practical training period in which methods from mental training were used such as: the repetition of confidence boosting statements; meditation; games on specific topics; breathing exercises, etc. Three training sessions were organized every week. The working program was divided into two parts: the first part occurred at the beginning of the sports training session, the second was at the end. Before each game, a 15 minute session of mental training was organized focusing on practice of psychological (emotional) abilities.

### Conclusions

1. The answers of the 12 drama students in the 2nd year were as follows:
  1. a) 90% ; b) 10% ; c) 0%.
  2. a) 40% ; b) 40% ; c) 20%.
  3. a) 100 %.
  4. a) 100 %.
  5. a) 80% ; b) 20% ; c) 0%.

The role of mental training based on practising and stimulating psychological components has a major role in acting.

2. We present here some of the notes of Aurelian B., specialist in sports psychology, based on the results obtained after implementing the methods and after the conversations with the athletes:

- the players were more confident in both training and in their performance during games;
- fewer mistakes were made, both during training and during the official games;
- conflict situations could be honestly avoided between members of the opponent teams and members of the same team

- an important game in the championship was won against a more powerful opposing team.

3. We consider that it is a good moment to urge the coaches and athletes to study and

adopt elements of mental training specific of those used by professional actors. Even if *The actor's psychology* does not exist as a discipline in the curriculum of vocational education institutions, certain psychological processes are approached at various stages in the actor's training and there are many exercises that can be adopted as models in the athlete's mental training.

4. Psychological training is not compulsory for either domain, theatre or sports. However, where they are adopted in a thorough manner and especially with determination, high indicators will be obtained in the development of the intellectual, emotional, volitional

and personality qualities.

5. Actors and athletes should learn to gain control over their thinking process so that

their thoughts could generate a mixture of internal and external circumstances which should stimulate their motivation for maintaining a high level of concentration.

6. Success, with its indisputable psychological nature, results from the qualitative synergy of psychological processes against the background of existing given faculties (i.e. talent) subject to the activities of professional training.

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### **Biography**

Ana-Cristina Le e is Assistant Professor at the “George Enescu” Arts University in Ia i. She graduated the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports at the “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Ia i, has an M.A. degree in Physical Education and a PhD degree in Drama.