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Dr. Gloria Balague

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Dr. Gloria Balague is a clinical assistant professor in the Psychology Department of the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is a native of Barcelona, Spain, and has been a consultant for US Track and Field since 1989. Gloria has accompanied the team to Olympic and World Championships and continues her involvement both at the elite level as well as in the Coaches' Education Program. Besides track and field, Gloria has worked with USA Gymnastics and USA Field Hockey.

Dr. Balague is co-founder, with Dr. Hellison, of the TPSR-Alliance (Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility through Sport), and is invested in finding a feasible model of competitive sport for children that preserves and enhances the educational values of sport and physical activity. She has authored numerous articles and chapters in sport psychology and has been keynote speaker at the International Olympic Congress (Australia, 2000), the European Conference in Sport Psychology (Denmark, 2003), and the Latin American Congress of Sport Psychology (Chile, 2006). She is the current president of APA Division 47.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

When I think about my background, both personally and professionally, I think in terms of a "before" and an "after": before I left Spain or came to the US, and after. Leaving my country and adjusting to a new place was definitely a difficult thing, but I believe it helped me understand transitions better, and that turned out to be very helpful.

I grew up in a family that valued practicing sports and academics. My father was one of the first sport medicine physicians in Spain, and he held the same expectations for me as he did for my brothers. I studied psychology, but at that time it did not yet distinguish specialties, so I studied a bit of everything. During my schooling in Spain, I sought a practicum site and ended up at the National Sports Medicine Center, associated to the Olympic Training Center where I stayed until I came to the US.

At the National Sports Medicine Center, I had daily contact with swimming, track and field, and modern pentathlon athletes and their coaches. Other athletes, such as those from the alpine skiing team and several members of the mountain climbing team preparing for expeditions to Mount Everest, would come to the Center twice yearly and be evaluated. Psychology was a routine part of the evaluation and it included measures of coordination, speed, reaction time, depth perception, and concentration along with the then standard personality instruments such as the 16PF. Team sports were also given a *Sociogram* to measure group structure and communication patterns. I did not know very much at the start, but I learned a lot there.

From that position, I transitioned to running the Social Sciences Department at the first College of Physical Education. Until then, PE was not a college degree and it was segregated by gender. At the same time, I met the national swimming coach who would soon become my husband and got to see the stress of a coach's position from the inside! I was vice dean of the college when I left Spain, and after a few months I had the status of graduate student at the University of Illinois, Chicago (UIC). A PhD in clinical and social psychology was my choice because I could not imagine trying to understand the individual without the context of the group or environment. Sport psychology was then close to becoming a casualty of the clinical training demands, besides the fact that no one at UIC had any interest in it. For my dissertation I decided to pursue my original passion again, and that choice felt like a real conscious commitment to sport psychology. Afterward I worked for several years at Cook County Hospital and it seemed easy to stay in the health psychology/clinical field, but I was determined to continue with sport psychology and performed work "on the side."

Serendipity worked its way to me when I attended a sport psychology conference in Washington, DC. I was placed in a group discussing the case of a hurdler. I had previously worked with hurdlers and their coaches in Spain, so I actively participated in the discussion. As it turned out, the head of sports medicine for USA Track & Field was sitting in that group and invited me to collaborate with them. In 1990, I traveled with the junior track and field team and afterward was tagged for accompanying the team to the 1992 Olympic Games to be held in my home town of Barcelona.

I have also worked with other national teams such as rhythmic gymnastics and women's field hockey. At UIC I started, also quite accidentally, to work with the baseball team and that provided a different experience, not only because of the age and level of the players, but because of the chance to have a long term relationship with a program. I enjoy that work immensely! I feel that working with coaches is a more effective way to use our resources, and I have learned to have an enormous amount of respect for them.

Recently, I have become very involved with youth sports as a result of my work with Don Hellison (www.TPSR-alliance.org). Through our collaboration I am convinced that our profession can be very effective if we can help demonstrate that coaching young athletes to be responsible, to set goals for themselves, and to be independent thinkers and good teammates, will ultimately result in better citizens and thus better performers, even at the elite level. Looking toward the future, we have a lot of ground to cover.

THEORY OF PERFORMANCE EXCELLENCE

Years ago, I would have said that performance excellence is achieved by those athletes who possess the following characteristics:

HIGH DEGREE OF SELF-AWARENESS. They are able to describe what they are doing, both from a physical as well as from a psychological perspective. They can, in general, describe what thoughts were in their minds at a certain time, are aware of their emotional reactions and can also sense where their body is in space, discriminating between what they wanted to do and what they actually did.

MOTIVATION TO ACHEIVE. The demands of high level performance require that athletes be really motivated to achieve success. Just loving the sport may not be enough because we see athletes who love to train but do not have a great desire to succeed, and it is harder for those athletes to reach performance excellence. Of course, here we are defining from the outside

what performance excellence is. The individual definition of the term remains a very important point that we, as sport psychologists, cannot ignore or we run the risk of imposing our definition and thus setting the goals for the athlete. I would define motivation to achieve as the commitment to pursue athletic excellence, and the willingness to put forth the effort and to prioritize that goal over other (also likeable) options.

CONFIDENCE. An athlete who decides to pursue excellence, by definition, has some degree of belief that he or she is capable of it. The resilience of that belief is the base of confidence. Successful athletes are able to tolerate periods of time without results if they know or trust that they are on the right path. It is the sum of the two types of beliefs described by Nideffer (1985): faith (belief in the absence of results) and confidence (belief based in the results achieved) that will result in the most resilient and consistent athlete.

FLEXIBILITY. High levels of confidence allow an athlete to tolerate slow progress or lack of immediate results. A very motivated and confident athlete can also deal with the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in major competitions such as weather delays, international differences in the interpretation of rules, opponent or lane assignments viewed as unfavorable, etc. The opposite extreme of the continuum, rigidity, allows the athlete to perform only when the conditions are right, which encompasses an uncontrollable set of events.

DISCIPLINE. I consider it a behavioral expression of motivation. Athletes who say they want to perform at their highest level, but do not do the things they need to do to get to that level, have competing motivations (social or personal) that interfere. Discipline alone can be a double-edged sword: Some athletes are extremely disciplined because that is what is required of them or because that is what is expected of them (coach, parents, etc.); thus, in neither case would it be an expression of intrinsic motivation.

All of the previously mentioned characteristics can be bettered in some way when working with an athlete who wants to improve them. There are going to be great interpersonal differences, but success is often achieved by different combinations of these qualities so that, for example, one athlete with less self-awareness can make up for it with more motivation and a better work ethic. Motivation must exist within the athlete, but even motivated athletes can learn ways to stay on track and better direct and use their efforts. Sometimes extrinsic motivation, when it is very powerful, has great intrinsic implications and can function as well as intrinsic motivation. We

have seen examples of this in athletes of certain countries or economic situations where athletic success is one of the main ways for the athlete and his or her family to achieve a better socio-economic status and have learning and travel options not otherwise available to them. Once the situation changes, these rewards lose their motivating power, which is one of the issues noticed by some very successful foreign coaches. When they tried to replicate a method that worked in a certain socio-political environment with US athletes, they had very different results, with people leaving or refusing to comply, and generally failing to achieve performance excellence.

Some of the specific issues, such as flexibility, are particularly susceptible to practice and should be included as part of the training regimen. Coaches should work these issues into their practices (e.g., long or short warm-ups, delays, position changes, sun in your eyes). This is also an effective area of collaboration between sport psychologists and coaches.

Confidence is a more complex variable and it must be balanced with a sense of challenge. Some special cases are the early excellent performers—young athletes who are better, physically and technically, than their counterparts. These gifted athletes grow up believing that success means beating everyone else by a lot with minimal effort, and they can get caught in the trap of not taking the opponent seriously. The other risk is that, once they start facing competition of the same quality as their own, these athletes may re-examine their self appraisal and believe that they are not as good as they once thought, lose confidence, and abandon competition for the wrong reasons. Teams who face a lesser caliber opponent are also at risk of underperforming if they perceive they do not need to use all of their skills; high confidence and low sense of challenge often combine to mean low effort, and in sport that is always a dangerous proposition. So the task for the coach and for the sport psychologist is to highlight an individual (or team) goal that is challenging, controllable, and then review the skills the athlete or team has to meet that challenge, protecting confidence but ensuring effort.

Finally, if we are talking about consistent performance excellence, I believe there is a need for some form of balance in the athlete. Good support, interpersonal relationships, and a sense of coherence between values and behaviors are needed, or like Loehr and Schwartz (2003) indicated, to maintain good performance a balance between the demands and the physical, emotional and spiritual energy is necessary. When that happens, there is a level of overall trust that allows the athlete to remain in the present and perform.

As I said earlier, this would have been my response a few years ago, but I now feel a need to qualify this answer.

THE CASE OF YOUNGER ATHLETES. I have seen younger athletes, usually in sports such as gymnastics or figure skating, who perform at an optimal level in competition until about age 12 (age limits are always relative in psychology). After that point, some of them develop fears and anxieties that were not present early on. Part of it is, of course, due to the physical changes and maturation that come with adolescence and the modification of some perceptual/motor sensations. But the main problem, I believe, is associated with the development of abstract thinking. Instead of just performing the well learned skill in an "automatic" mode, these athletes now start thinking about the performance, about its consequences (usually only in the negative, such as the possibility of injury or the possibility of failure) and try to impose a level of control that interferes with performance. So, in a way, it seems like this form of self-awareness is not productive. I believe that it is not exactly the self-awareness per se that interferes, but the fact that fear of failure and perfectionistic tendencies may be emerging. Early on, it is hard to clearly determine the issue, and it is developmentally appropriate to learn to think about one's performance, but that should be accompanied with learning the consequences of different types of thinking, and learning to choose the right type of thoughts. Often, frustrated coaches and parents say phrases such as "Do not think so much," which is not very helpful to the athlete. Instead they should help the young athlete to "think right." During the earlier years, when athletes are performing well, the ability to stay in the present appears to be one of the central skills.

THE CASE OF THE CONCRETE, NON-REFLECTIVE ATHLETE. I have worked with some athletes who are not very prone to self-reflection, who do not verbalize their feelings well and who do not pay close attention to their thoughts or moods. Early on, I tried to change the way these athletes worked, as you can imagine, with little success. Some of them performed at a consistently high level and that made me pay closer attention to their style.

Many athletes have excellent intuition, even if they cannot always clearly verbalize it. They "know" when to change strategy and do not like complex verbal prescriptions, which tend to dominate my interventions (and perhaps sport psychology in general). Perhaps at the risk of simplifying this too much, I would talk of a right brain (as opposed to left brain) dominance. These athletes recognize temporal patterns and spatial sequences but are not very good at translating them into verbal, sequential descriptions. What I have done with these athletes is, depending on their level of experience, try to simplify the process so they only focus on a few recognizable elements and free up their attention for using their perceptual and sensory skills. Images

and sensations are the preferred foci of attention, and verbal reminders, if used at all, are more associated with such sensations (smooth, go hard, or even see red). In my experience, too much prescription backfires with these athletes, probably because I suggest strategies more appropriate to my perceptual style, which does not match theirs.

I was first alerted to this when an athlete on a national team asked for my help with his insomnia due to jet lag. As is standard for my procedure, I made a relaxation tape and gave it to him. The next day the athlete came and said that there was "too much talking" on the tape and that he found it distracting rather than relaxing. So after talking to him I made a new one, with few words repeated rhythmically and some soothing music. That worked well for him. Afterward, I paid more attention to how athletes described their events and their reactions, listening to whether my questions made sense to them right away or not, so I could adapt my interventions to their style.

I want to clarify that a concrete style by no means implies lower intelligence. It is just a different style of processing and expressing themselves; these athletes may appear to lack self-awareness, but this is not exactly the case.

PERFORMANCE EXCELLENCE IN TEAMS. Finding consistent performance excellence patterns in teams is much harder than in individual sports, and I remain intrigued by the rapidly changing conditions in teams that make our work much more challenging. What I have seen is that teams that perform very well are not necessarily the ones with the most individual talent. As a matter of fact, higher levels of individual talent tend to result in more individualistic behavior and lower level team performance. Just as with individual athletes, performance excellence starts in practice, and the following are the characteristics I would list as best describing successful teams: (a) Strong work ethic that also keeps alive the fun and enjoyment. These athletes work very hard and train with intensity but enjoy the process; (b) Good interpersonal relationships among teammates, on and off the field. Teams must enjoy being with and supporting one another. The team is an important entity and athletes care about it almost as much as they care about their individual performances; (c) Trust. These teams trust themselves, their teammates and their coaches. There are always disagreements with coaches, but there must exist a strong element of trust in the process for the team to perform at a high level; (d) Competitiveness or love of competition. Some teams "train" very well together, but successful teams love to compete, are energized by competition, and are not afraid of failure.

How do we get all of these characteristics together in a team? The main issue has to do with leadership within the team, and that relates both to recruiting as well as to the culture of the team. It is important for team coaches to select not just an individual with athletic talent, but also one with exceptional interpersonal qualities and values. Part of our job should be to work with coaches to develop the list of desirable traits and ways of assessing their presence or absence. Team culture also has the power to influence team dynamics by reinforcing the style that characterizes the team and helping athletes who do not fit in to move out to other teams (what Collins [2001] calls "getting off the bus"). When there is a sense of identity within the team, older athletes help the new ones develop the right approach, and that speeds up the process. For that to occur the athletes have to feel invested, feel pride in their team and believe they have a say in it, which is, of course, an issue that relies heavily on the coaching system. Finally, there is also an element of luck or uncontrollability that makes some combinations of players work great and helps them to reach excellence, while others just remain mediocre.

Even in individual sports, the impact of the team culture is major and should be addressed when looking at performance excellence. The younger the athlete, the more important the group influence is likely to be, but the impact is felt even at the elite level.

THEORY OF PERFORMANCE BREAKDOWNS

The same way that many pathways, or combinations of traits and skills, lead to performance excellence, many pathways lead to performance breakdowns.

DOING THE WORK. We have to start with athletes completing the necessary amount of work, since there is no substitute for quality practices. In the same way, confidence is mainly based on the work done, so when athletes know they have not put in the necessary effort (sometimes because of injuries, etc.) or believe the training they have done was not sufficient (they do not trust the athletic system), that undermines their confidence in a very powerful way and their performance suffers. Similar to this issue are changes in coaching that do not allow for a good enough transition phase before results are expected. Too often I have seen athletes switch to train with a renowned coach the year of the Olympic Games, without giving themselves enough time to develop a good communication system with the new coach or to absorb the new technique, etc., and it results in a decrease in performance. For post-collegiate athletes, there is an added environmental difficulty

in that training conditions are sometimes substandard: There is often no "training group," and athletes have to train alone or without any one capable of pushing them. Some athletes try to coach themselves; and that is often a very difficult task because coaching oneself interferes with the ability to just perform and engages the analytic, judgmental perspective.

EXCESSIVE PRESSURE. Assuming that work has been done, the next most common source of performance breakdowns is excessive pressure. When the athlete switches from an "I CAN" to an "I HAVE TO" attitude, the result is likely to be a switch to a more "controlled" type of performance, often having as a main goal the avoidance of mistakes, which is very different from the mindset of trust and achieving performance excellence.

Excessive pressure sometimes occurs as a characterological issue: Some athletes are perfectionists and always look for the total absence of mistakes, which is not the path to performance excellence. These athletes tend to do well when there is no pressure or a reason that would explain a lower level of achievement, such as an illness, injury, etc., but the more they want to succeed, the worse they often perform.

Some of these athletes translate good practices and good performance in training into pressure, as in, "I have no excuse to perform badly." Once they are aware of the fact that they are doing well, they assume that everyone's expectations for them are of success and soon switch to the over-controlling mode. Other examples of excessive pressure are attendance of scouts to practice, parents present during an event, and players who are not starters and are given a chance to start. In these instances, the dominant thought of the athlete is some version of "I have to perform well, or else."

LACK OF SELF-AWARENESS OF SELF-CONTROL. Some of the most frustrating settings have to do with athletes who are unable to describe what happened because they do not know. A common example is athletes who are low in self-awareness not being able to accurately convey what happened when they experienced success or failure. In many instances the issue is really a lack of experience or practice at self-regulation. For example, some athletes know that they often doubt their ability to perform and fear making mistakes. A common assignment would be to help them focus on what they can do or what they did well during their last practice. If athletes tell themselves that this is what they want to do before the competition, they may report this. But wanting to do it is very different from doing it, and the intensity of their emotional response at the competition obscures everything else and many cannot remember or report what actually happened. Sometimes video-

taping the athletes at the actual warm-up and competition and watching the video with them helps to start the process of awareness.

LACK OF EMOTIONAL REGULATION. Unexpected or unprepared emotions are one of the main issues that often underlie performance breakdowns. Getting angry at an official's call, unexpectedly being ahead of a "superior" opponent, or celebrating a good performance too much or too soon are all unexpected emotional reactions that an athlete cannot regulate in the moment. The emotion does not have to be negative; it just has to be the wrong focus for the moment to interfere.

MOTIVATIONAL ISSUES. I have also seen a number of motivational issues negatively impact performance when they interfere with the right focus and intensity of competition. A prime example is athletes who are angry or resentful towards their coaches or athletic system. They become conflicted with the desire to perform well and the feeling that the coach or system does not deserve the success and enjoyment that their success would give them. I have seen this especially in athletes who have an intense coach/athlete relationship like those in gymnastics or figure skating. Other motivational issues that I've seen emerge are from interviews with elite female athletes who had children: Some of them felt very ambivalent about pursuing athletic achievement when that meant separation from their children for extended periods of time.

Performance Breakdowns in Teams

Some of the issues seen in the individual athlete section would result in performance breakdowns of a team, but there are also specific issues that are unique to a team's performance breakdown.

PREPARATION PHASE TOO LONG OR INADEQUATE. Some national teams, composed of elite players from all over the country, sometimes underperform in major competitions, such as the Olympic Games, because of their precompetition preparation. For example, one national team had moved to the city where the Olympic Games would be held a full year before the competition. Being moved out of their familiar environment and knowing only each other made for many difficult interpersonal situations, which eroded the team's chemistry and transferred negatively to the field of play. Training camps before a major competition can be helpful, but they can also be damaging if they do not allow for individual ways of managing pressure.

LACK OF ROLE CLARITY OR CONTRADICTORY GOALS. Effective team performance requires the synchronization of players having to fulfill different and