

SPORTS

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Gib Twyman

Emotions are a part of athletes

Well, we're all pretty much agreed, as our athletes queue up in the jails, courts and halfway houses, that much of contemporary American sports is traveling down a road about two bricks short of a load.

Could we use the couch trip? Should we seek professional help in the form of trained sports psychologists?

It's an idea advanced by a local sports psychologist, Andrew A. Jacobs, and, if you ask me, it couldn't hurt, the way things are going.

We spend all this time getting our athletes to run, jump, flip and flex, examining everything from their tonsils to their toenails, but little time evaluating them emotionally and mentally.

Now, admittedly, injecting the idea of professional analysis into organized sports conjures up an image of some googly-eyed Freud, sitting in some leather chair going "Hmmm" and "I see" for an hour. There have been some quacks in the field who have done the serious guys mischief.

But a key would be the word "trained," and here you have someone like Jacobs. A Shawnee Mission North and Vanderbilt graduate, he is one of only 53 professionals on the U.S. Olympic Committee Sport Psychology Registry. He has worked with the U.S. cycling team for the 1984 Olympics; the U.S. swimming and weightlifting federations. He has counseled teams at the University of Kansas and San Diego State and the Kansas City Comets. This spring he'll work with players in the Chicago White Sox minor league system.

How could sports psychology help? Changing the perception of our athletes would be one starting point.

"A lot of these people have to be developed emotionally and mentally as people, not just as athletes," Jacobs said. "Football coaches are too often 'goin' out to get me some football players.' Hunks of meat, rather than people."

Nebraska football Coach Tom Osborne lamented this week at the NCAA College Football Preview that you can't hope to evaluate the emotional well-being of 125 young men in your program with one meeting in the home and a chat with the high school guidance counselor. Agreed. What would be wrong with a simple psychological interview and profile as part of his evaluation?

"If they spend all this time sizing him up physically, certainly they could spend a couple of hours evaluating him emotionally," Jacobs said.

A bigger key might be helping the athletes once they get to the university. From 1981-85, Jacobs worked on the staff at the University of Kansas, two days a week, offering individual counseling.

"I'd be there from 7 in the morning till 8 at night and I never had a free minute," he said. "Kids came to me with everything from bulimia and anorexia to anger, communications and relationship problems, time management, study skills—all outside of sports stuff, the concentration, motivation and all that."

"One of the main things I try to do is change the perception of winning. Pressure and stress cause most of the problems. Whether you win or lose matters, sure, but we've carried it way too far for emotional health. When you walk off the field feeling you gave your best effort, that's your victory or defeat."

Jacobs helps athletes define their strengths, weakness, fears, goals and focus on direction in life. Where are they headed?

"You've got to start asking such questions down in youth leagues and high school levels," said Jacobs, who is offering a clinic Saturday at Pembroke Hill School, featuring Nick Lowery, a star Jacobs' pupil, dealing with physiology, psychology, nutrition and drug abuse. "You've got to educate the coaches."

Trained psychology techniques may not tell you if a guy is going to walk out on a balcony and fire off an Uzi. But they can at least begin to give us a glimpse inside our athletes, which is better than some of the current alternatives.