

RON MEYER, one of the nation's top divers, used to be so fearful about performing his reverse three-and-a-half somersault off the 10-meter platform that every time he attempted it, he leaped too far away from the platform's edge to get a good score. A sports psychologist hypnotized him and had him mentally rehearse doing the dive closer to the platform, and after several sessions Meyer could do it physically, too.

In the midst of a 100-lap race, a contender for the Olympic cycling team was so nervous that when he attempted to accelerate into the lead his muscles refused. And some members of the Olympic men's volleyball team were not working as hard in practice as the coach wanted, although they thought they were trying. A sports psychologist helped in both these cases, too, teaching relaxation and positive-reinforcement exercises.

Until recently, such powers as concentration, intensity and coolness under pressure were generally assumed to be innate, as much a part of an athlete's makeup as his bone structure. But under the swiftly expanding influence of sports psychologists, more and more athletes and coaches are becoming convinced that mental and emotional strengths can be learned.

"We're talking about systematically training people to gain control over their mental processes, the same way they've gained control over their physical processes," said Dr. Robert Nideffer of San Diego, one of the pioneers in sports psychology in this country, who serves on the sports

psychology advisory committee of the United States Olympic Committee's Sports Medicine Division.

Nideffer works directly with American track-and-field Olympians, and he and his protege, Don Greene, counsel some of the Olympic divers.

"They've really helped me," said Wendy Wyland, the world champion in springboard and platform. "I have a fear on my back two- and-a-half, which they've helped me learn to control."

Nideffer's relaxation techniques also helped Tom Petranoff set the world javelin record, according to Petranoff. "I focus on a spot on the runway, until I get this tunnel vision," Petranoff said.

Petranoff and Miss Wyland are among the beneficiaries of the U.S.O.C.'s Elite Athlete Project. Through it, the latest research in all areas of sports medicine is disseminated regularly to Olympic-caliber athletes in seven sports: archery, cycling, diving, fencing, track and field, volleyball and weight- lifting. Several times a year, athletes gather for a camp session, where they get counseling in biomechanics, nutrition, podiatry and related fields, and sports psychology.

The Olympic cycling team has had the same psychologist helping it for almost three years, Dr. Andrew Jacobs, another of Nideffer's former students. John Beckman, a 25- year-old team member, told of how Jacobs had helped him before the Olympic trials.

"I was very nervous," Beckman recalled. "Andy reminded me that I was a two-time national champion in that event, and a Pan American

champion at 50 kilometers, and that a lot of people in the race would be afraid of competing against me. "

The psychologists' roles range from simple tasks, like Jacobs's pep talk to Beckman, to more complex efforts such as smoothing out personality conflicts, counseling on drug use or illnesses such as anorexia and bulimia, helping athletes overcome severe nervousness, or actually helping performance - as Greene did for Meyer through hypnosis.

"I work with them on fears of certain dives, but also with confidence problems and on finding the optimal arousal level for competition," said Greene, a former diver.

"We identify what arousal level this particular person needs," said Nideffer. "Then we identify stimuli that lead to that physiological change, and try to reconstruct them."

"It incorporates deep-breathing from the martial arts, conscious relaxing of key muscles, positive self-statements, and refocusing attention," said Greene.

A psychologist is also, in many ways, like a professional coach. Some coaches see the psychologist as usurping the coach's traditional roles as confidante and motivator.

"Those coaches are on a bit of an ego trip," said Mark Schubert, the Mission Viejo swim club's head coach and an assistant coach on the United States Olympic swim team.

Schubert estimated that 80 to 90 percent of the nation's top swimmers have been exposed to sports psychology, and that 70 to 80 percent of them use techniques learned from such psychologists.

"It's not magic, like if you have a psychologist you'll win," said Beckman. "But sometimes it brings out the winner in you."