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Andy Cline photo
Dr. Andrew Jacobs, a Kansas City psychologist, helps athletes and business people find the winning edge.

Doctor probes minds to find winning edge

By TOM GRESS

On the playing field or in the office, Dr. Andrew Jacobs, a Kansas City psychologist, believes winning abilities are locked inside almost everyone.

It's Jacobs' job to find the key that will let them out. "My work is designed to help persons reach their potential," says Jacobs, founder of The Winning Edge, a Kansas City-based practice. "What I have found is that athletes are high-level performers who have to cope with stress and doubts. Those same qualities are found in business men and women."

Jacobs has been working with businesses for the last year, after five years of helping individual athletes such as Nick Lowery, placekicker for the Kansas City Chiefs, and Pat McDonough, a cyclist who won a silver medal in the 1984 Olympics. He also has worked with entire teams, such as the Kansas City Comets and the United States Cycling Team.

Whether he's working with an athlete or a business person, Jacobs first identifies the problem, such as a lack of confidence or an apathetic attitude, and then does a series of tests to decide how to solve it.

For example, Jacobs said, he once worked with a professional athlete

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Psychologist helps find winning edge

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whose individual performance was good, but whose team lost on a regular basis. The losing attitude carried over to the player, who became dissatisfied with his abilities.

Jacobs had the player list his goals and positive and negative feelings about himself. From there, he said, the player was able to understand that he couldn't control every aspect of the team's performance and that he had to concentrate on his role. The player's performance gradually returned to normal, and then began to exceed his goals.

The same types of problems occur in business, Jacobs said.

"People come in who have lost motivation or lack confidence," Jacobs said. "I sit down with them, try to see what their role is in the business and what their goals are. If they have achieved those goals, then we set new ones. If they haven't, we find out what's stopping them."

The Winning Edge is a solo venture, although Jacobs hopes to add other psychologists as the practice grows in coming years. Jacobs declines to say how many businesses he's currently working with.

His own athletic competition led Jacobs into sports psychology. As a tennis player at Vanderbilt University, Jacobs said, he often found himself losing matches because he was overanxious. When he started his graduate studies at the California School of Professional Psychology in San Diego, he saw that the sports field was ripe for what he calls mental conditioning.

"Athletes come out in peak physical condition, but sometimes the real edge in competition will go to the person who is mentally fit and prepared," he said.

Jacobs' work has concentrated on improving athletes' attitudes toward competition, and on blocking out secondary problems that may affect their performances. The results generally have been good, although some stress that psychological training won't work for every athlete.

"These types of things are highly individual," said Gary Kempf, men's and women's swimming coach at the University of Kansas, which used Jacobs during

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the 1982-83 school year. "I don't think you can label a whole team as needing this. For some, it's going to work well. For others, it may not make any difference."

Kempf said several of his swimmers went to Jacobs because they were either disappointed with their performances, lacked confidence in themselves, or were having trouble handling schoolwork along with competition.

Kempf said he saw some improvements after Jacobs worked with the swimmers, but added that it's difficult to say if the improvements were related to the work.

Another coach, Rick Benben of the Kansas City Comets, believes Jacobs' techniques could be a boon to team sports. After having Jacobs work with

Comets players, Benben hopes the team will work more smoothly together on the soccer field.

"In just about every job you have to have teamwork, and we were looking for someone who could help our players focus on working together," said Benben. "We have seen some improvements on an individual basis and I just hope that Andy will help us collectively."

Jacobs has worked with the Comets on both an individual basis and as a group. He stresses what he calls team building and group dynamics, where he tries to get players to discuss team issues that may be affecting their play.

During hourlong sessions with the players, he tries to make them understand what they can control and what they can't.

"If I was working with a goalie who has been facing a lot of three-on-one breaks, giving up goals and losing confidence, then I would want him to concentrate on how much of it was his responsibility and how much was the team's overall defense," Jacobs said.

The help doesn't come cheap: Jacobs charges \$750 for six one-hour individual sessions. That includes the cost of a workbook and a test that covers interpersonal skills. The group program, which includes a four-hour seminar for up to 10 people, costs \$650 plus \$25 per person for materials.

Jacobs doesn't promise results overnight. The sessions, he said, are intended to start the changes an individual needs, and further sessions may be needed.

"I can't say that any business, after a couple of sessions with their employees, will see their employees turn into world leaders in productivity," Jacobs said. "It can enhance an employee's performance and help him or her work at the peak level."