

University of Kansas  
Lawrence, Kansas

## Sports psychologist helps athletes as 'mental coach'

By ANDREW HARTLEY  
Staff Reporter

Andrew Jacobs strolled down the hall at Robinson Center after being a guest lecturer in a class on the psychology of coaching. About every 20 feet he stopped to shake hands with a smiling athlete who said, "Hey, Andy. Howya doing?"

Minutes later, he stopped outside the swimming pool to chat with a member of the women's swimming team whom he had not seen in several weeks.

IN THE TRACK OFFICE at Allen Field House, coaches and athletes would stop him to say, "Hey, Andy. I need to get in to see you today and talk about several things."

At Memorial Stadium later in the day, Jacobs, 28, spoke with a member of the women's track team about the Kansas Relays and then stopped by pole vaulting practice to assist two men in relaxation exercises.

Andrew Jacobs is a sports psychology consultant who works with track and swimming athletes at the University of Kansas, a position he has had for a little more than a year.

AFTER NINE YEARS of studying to earn a doctorate in psychology, the Kansas City native returned in 1981 to set up a private practice there and now works with athletes at the University of Kansas.

He also works at the Pain Management Center at Menorah Medical Center in Kansas City, Mo., and is the

sports psychology consultant to the U.S. Olympic Cycling Team.

Every Tuesday he spends the day working with KU athletes to help combat problems such as stress, anxiety, concentration lapses and short attention span. The techniques he uses are personal sessions, hypnosis and physical exercises.

"The main element of someone working in sports psychology is that we're essentially being the mental coach," Jacobs said.

"MY JOB HERE IS NOT to coach athletes or tell them how to jump or tell them what to do. First of all, I don't know that much about it, and if I did, I would be talking out of position.

"I'm probably one of 40 or 50 people

in the United States qualified to do this sort of thing."

Because of his popularity and the success he has brought to individual athletes, nine teams will be using his services next year.

But seven years ago, he had no idea that his work in psychology would be with athletes, a field that is just now increasing in popularity in the United States.

Jacobs was always certain that he wanted to work as a psychologist, but not as a sports psychologist. From 1972-76, he attended Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., and earned a bachelor's degree in psychology.

IN SEPTEMBER 1976, he began graduate work at the California School of Professional Psychology in San Diego.

"When I was out there, I didn't want to become your typical shrink," he said.

During his second year of graduate school, Jacobs met a staff member who was one of the top sports psychologists in the United States. Jacobs was attracted by the opportunity to work with athletes.

Through his graduate work, Jacobs became involved in an internship program with athletes from nearby San Diego State, the only program of its kind at that time.

When he worked with a member of the men's tennis team through the internship program, he found out how important concentration and attention spans were to the athlete.

"THIS GUY'S PROBLEM was that the freshman dorm was right next to the courts," Jacobs said.

"The neat thing about that was the freshman girls would come out in their bikinis to watch the team play, which in one sense spurred them on. But the bad thing was that this guy was distracted because there would be these girls out there lying down right behind the fence."

He said the tennis player would be looking at the girls' legs while he was serving rather than concentrating on the tennis ball.

"He even got aced several times when he was receiving serve," Jacobs said. "So we worked on developing more of a narrow focus. He understood that off court he could do that all he wanted, but on the court he couldn't."

"He was the No. 14 player on the team and had all of the physical abilities to be No. 1. He admitted that it was all in his head."

Jacobs said he worked with the player for three months, and then the player moved up to No. 1 singles.

JACOBS' INVOLVEMENT at KU started in 1981.

"When I got settled in Kansas City, I interviewed with a lot of the smaller colleges in the Kansas City area," he said. "They were interested in a sports psychology consultant, but did not have the resources to do it."

Then he met Mike Bahrke, KU associate professor of health, physical education and recreation, at a sports medicine meeting on campus. Bahrke asked Jacobs whether he wanted to work with KU athletes and then sent a memo to coaches. At that time, only the two track coaches were interested.

Jacobs said, "Things would not have gone well without the cooperation of the coaches. They gave me the opportunity. They are believers in what I'm doing."

ONE OF THE BELIEVERS was Carla Coffey, head women's track coach, who said she had noticed Jacobs' effect on the 10 athletes he had worked with.

"I've seen a real improvement in the athletes in competition situations and in practice," she said. "It shows in their attitudes and performance in their events."

One of Jacobs' greatest supporters is head track coach Bob Timmons.

Jacobs said, "I can't say enough about Coach Timmons. Of course, there are a lot of people who can't say enough about him. He gave me the opportunity to work here. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be here."

ROGER BOWEN, ASSISTANT men's track coach, said, "The guys Andy has worked with really respect him and have responded well to him. Some of the athletes have really turned around. If that can be attributed to him, that's great."

"But it is difficult to measure success with a thing like this. There's no test an athlete can take to determine whether it's working or not."

This year, Jacobs has also worked with several members of the swim team. Swim coach Gary Kempf also said he could not link the success of some of his athletes directly to their work with Jacobs.

Kempf said he was against saying his athletes improved as a result of work with Jacobs because all aspects of the sport worked together — the coaches, the psychology consultant and especially the athlete.

But he does see the need for a psychological approach to athletics for helping with stress, pressure and visualizing a race.

"THE MENTAL APPROACH to athletics is one of the most valuable aspects of sports," Kempf said. "I think it's the next step in the advancement of all athletics."

One of the swimmers Jacobs has worked with is All-American Tammy Thomas. He has helped her with exercises in concentration, relaxation and imagery. In a recent article in Sports Illustrated, she credited him with part of her success.

"He's really low key," she said last week. "Sometimes we just talk or go get something to eat."

"I think some of the swimmers are pretty excited about having the chance to work with him next year."



Andrew Hartley/KANSAN

Andrew Jacobs, sports psychology consultant for the KU track teams, talked with Becky McGranahan before track practice at Memorial Stadium several days before she won first place in the discus throw at the Kansas Relays.