

ISSUES IN HEALTH CARE

BEYOND THE BARRIERS

KC-area sports psychologist sees many parallels between athletics and business

BY MARY-LANE KAMBERG

It took only five minutes for Andy Jacobs to decide what he wanted to do. Today, 17 years later, he has built a private practice and consulting business in sport psychology, a field that is still relatively new, but gaining acceptance among athletes and coaches from youth sports to the professional ranks.

"I was in my second year of graduate school and enrolled in a class in sport psychology," says Jacobs, who now holds a doctorate in psychology from the California School of Professional Psychology in San Diego. "Five minutes into the class, I knew I wanted to do this."

He studied with Robert Nideffer, author of *The Inner Athlete*, in the nation's first training program for sport psychologists. After finishing his post-graduate degree, he set three goals.

"I wanted to work with athletes at a university, a professional team and an Olympic team," he says.

On his way back to Kansas City in 1981 (he graduated from Shawnee Mission North High School in 1972), he stopped at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado for an interview.

"They said they didn't need any Ph.D. types running around telling them what was wrong with their athletes," Jacobs says.

Jacobs set up a private practice in Kansas City. Three years later the U.S. Olympic Committee began its Elite Athlete Program. They selected five sports whose American teams had not been performing well at the Olympic level and gave them the tools they requested to work with the athletes. One of those tools was sport psychology.

Jacobs was chosen to work with the 1984 cycling team. His mentor, Nideffer, worked with track and field.

"The Americans hadn't won a Olympic cycling medal in 72 years," Jacobs says. "In 1984 they won nine."

Jacobs worked personally with athletes who won six of them. His business, *The Winning Edge*, has since experienced 200 percent growth.

Acting on several fronts

Jacobs works one-on-one with athletes as well as consulting with sports teams all over the country. He also presents programs to groups that include sports teams and businesses. He has worked with team members from the Kansas City Chiefs, the Kansas City Royals and players at the University of Kansas. He has consulted with the Chicago White Sox, the Australian National Swim Team, the U.S. Weightlifting and Swimming Federations, the U.S. Tennis Association and the Professional Golfers' Association.

He has produced two audio cassettes, "20 Minutes to Total Relaxation" and "20 Minutes to Athletic Success." He also produced a video, "Sport Psychology: The Winning Edge in Sports."

"To me, winning means doing your best," Jacobs says. "The focus of what I do is to get people to look at that."

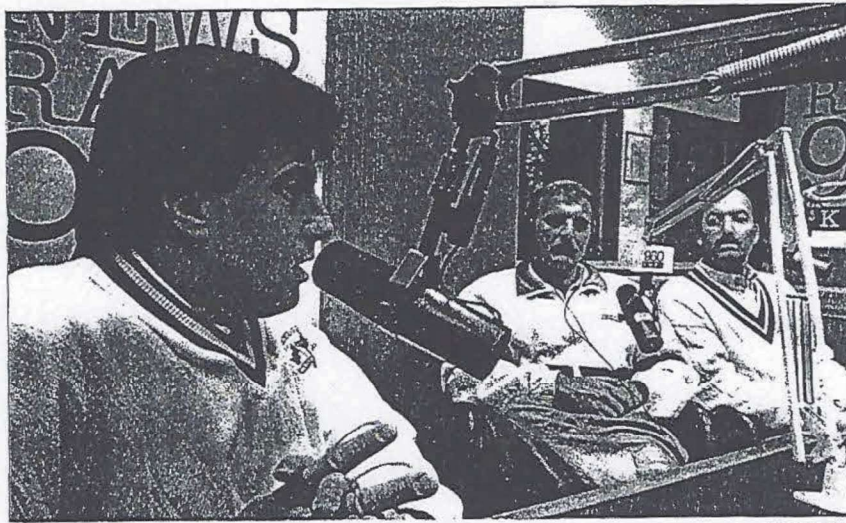
Athletes and people in business can use the same tools, Jacobs says. "I talk about goal setting, attitude, communication skills, confidence building, competition and working together as a team," he says.

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year period. Results were positive. "She got her grades up," Malone says. "And her swimming was better than ever. She was still aggressive and spirited, but Dr. Jacobs helped her corral that and understand herself."

Alan Mayer was the second kind of athlete. His association with Jacobs focused on enhancing performance. Mayer's 20-year career in professional soccer included a stint as goalkeeper with the Kansas City Comets. He was voted the Most Valuable Player in the Major Indoor Soccer League in 1982, the only American ever selected for that honor.



Sports psychologist Andy Jacobs talks into the microphone during his KMBZ radio show under the watchful eyes of Paul Smith, head coach of the Kansas City Explorers, and Tom Reiger, the general manager of the pro tennis team.

"These things apply to people in general, not just to athletes."

One area coach who has sent as many as 50 athletes to Jacobs during the last 10 years is Peter Malone, head coach and general manager of the Kansas City Blazers, a swimming team of about 250 swimmers between the ages of 6 and 22. The team includes some athletes at the elite level of competition, some of whom have been ranked in the top 25 in the world each year since 1979.

"At least 95 percent of the swimmers I've sent to Jacobs have benefited," Malone says. "Some have benefited in physical performance. But all of them have increased their self-worth and been better at balancing who they are with what they are trying to be."

Sport psychology is a tremendous tool for athletes, Malone says. "It helps them determine their strengths and weaknesses and deal with the stresses of fear and exhilaration. Athletes must learn to deal with everyday pressures and handle stress and anxiety to perform better."

Malone says athletes are different from "normal" people. "It's hard to understand a competitive athlete's mind," Malone says. "It's hard to explain why someone loves to compete and reach for peak potential. A normal person who stays in safe territory never experiences that outer limit."

He says competitive athletes reach for an emotional high, and the ones who

make it are capable of handling pressure at the top.

"Elite athletes are weird," Malone says. "They get high-strung and volatile. Dr. Jacobs seems to understand that and help them handle anxiety and perform better."

Malone says that while athletes train their bodies, they should also train their minds. "The mind runs the body the way a driver runs a car. If you build five cars of equal ability, a good mechanic will tell you that each has some form of uniqueness. If you put five different drivers in them, you'll get five different performances."

Malone says the two main advantages of using a neutral person between the athlete and coach and in improving communication. "As a coach, you're cultivating aggressiveness, competitive spirit and a win-at-all costs attitude and you're trying to balance that with be-a-good-sport. A coach's job is to be consistent and relentless until the job gets done."

"Dr. Jacobs is a neutral party. He doesn't care whether the athlete wins or loses. His role is to help the individual develop self-confidence and understanding. He sees the athlete as a person and deals with the inner personal aspects of performance and how to learn from both success and failure."

Quacks tarnish profession

Jacobs also helps teach athletes to lis-

focus and how to relax. Jacobs taught him how to channel his thoughts to concentrate on the game.

"You can have things going on outside the sport—the kids are sick or something like that. A war can be going on. But when the game comes, it's time to forget all that and go and play."

Mayer describes himself as an intense player. On game day he was "uptight and worried."

"Andy knew to stay away from me before a game," Mayer says. "But we had a ritual. Before I went out to play he'd say, 'Remember eye of the tiger.' He meant 'Go get it all. Keep that aggressiveness.' That one sentence was all I needed to be able to concentrate."

ten and how best to communicate with their coach, Malone says. Sometimes Jacobs asks the athlete's coach to attend a session to work out communication difficulties.

Malone says one danger of fusing someone who professes to be a sport psychologist is the relative newness of the field.

"Sport psychology became a buzzword in the mid- to late-1970s," Malone says. "A lot of people called themselves sport psychologists who had no training. There were a bunch of quacks out there who had no respect for the power and influence they had. They became almost guru-like trying to control the athlete."

Today, Malone says, there is better availability of competent people in the field. "You should choose a sport psychologist the same way you choose any doctor."

In Jacobs' practice, he sees two kinds of athletes. One is a person whose performance has been deteriorating. The other is someone who is doing well but wants to enhance performance.

One swimmer he worked with was the first kind. Malone sent her to see him when she was a sophomore in high school. "She was a great athlete, but things had always come easy," Malone says. "She had never learned to work. One day she crossed the line. She'd gone as far as she could on talent."

About the same time the girl's parents divorced. Her grades, which had been As, fell to Ds and Fs. "Her swimming was going in the hole," Malone says. "Her times were bad. Her attitude was bad. Her communication with her parents was bad. Our goal was to get her through her sophomore year."

The swimmer saw Jacobs over a three-

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Mayer says Jacobs also helped him learn to calm himself and detour his anger. "When you get upset, maybe the best thing is to count to five or six or 10 instead of following your first instinct to hit somebody," Mayer says. "If you do, you're out of the game. What did you accomplish? The second-string player is in, and your team loses the game."

Mayer says his talks with Jacobs helped him understand himself. "Fear motivated me," he says. "I've played in front of 200,000 people. I didn't want to fail in front of them and embarrass myself or my team."

Fear made him a better player, he thinks. Learning to deal with that fear helped him enjoy his sport. "When the game was over, the fear was gone," Mayer says. "What a great feeling!"