

STAR SPORTS

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Sports psychologist at Kansas concerns himself with the inner athlete

By Kevin Lollar
KU sports correspondent

During the 20th century Americans' interest in sports has surged. So has the interest in psychology.

Until the early 1970s, however, the psychological approach to sports was the Knute Rockne approach. The coach gave a rousing speech, told his athletes that when the going got tough the tough got going, then told them to win one for the Gipper.

This approach is beginning to change, and in the forefront of the movement is Andrew Jacobs, a 28-year-old Kansas City native and resident who recently was hired as sports psychologist at the

University of Kansas.

Jacobs, who earned his doctorate in clinical psychology two years ago at the California School of Professional Psychology in San Diego, said some athletes respond to the Knute Rockne approach, but others feel it as an added pressure and fall apart.

Each person responds differently to the pressures of competition, and each response can affect performance positively or negatively.

The problem, Jacobs said, is that in the United States, coaches and athletes have been concerned almost exclusively with the physical side of sports.

"The emphasis has always been on training, weights and conditioning and so

forth," he said. "The mental side was not just ignored, it was avoided. The athletes would say, 'We're not crazy. We don't need a psychologist.' There's definitely a stigma attached to it."

No such stigma has been attached to sports psychology in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe where psychological studies of athletes have been performed since the early 1950s. In fact, a text book on the subject, "The Inner Athlete: Mind Plus Muscle for Winning" by Bob Nideffer, Jacobs' mentor in San Diego, sold poorly in the United States. But it was translated into Russian and sold 14,000 copies in a week.

Jacobs said that during the 1950s and 1960s some research was done in the

United States. However, it involved mainly personality tests which did not help with the athletes' performance. Even now, there are fewer than 50 sports psychologists in the nation.

"A lot of people call themselves sports psychologists," Jacobs said, "but they do mainly research in areas like kinesiology (the study of human muscular movements) and exercise physiology. Applied clinical sports psychology stresses attitude, confidence and concentration."

Jacobs points out that the sports psychologist does not psychoanalyze athletes but helps them prepare mentally for competition.

"I help them help themselves," he said.

Jacobs became involved with sports psychology while in graduate school because he was interested in improving his performance on the tennis court.

He took a class from Nideffer, then organized the first sports-psychology program in the United States with the San Diego State tennis team. The team experienced a turnaround that year, going to the Western Athletic Conference finals.

Upon receiving his Ph.D., Jacobs, who works with the U.S. Olympic cycling team, returned to Kansas City and set up private practice.

He contacted various area schools,

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proposing a sports-psychology program, but none responded.

Then he attended a sports-medicine convention at the University of Kansas where he met Mike Bahrke of the Health and Physical Education Department.

Bahrke was impressed enough to send memos informing KU coaches of Jacobs' availability. Track Coach Bob Timmons was the first to respond. In December of 1981 Jacobs began working with the track team.

Soon after, Jacobs also began working with the swimming and tennis teams. Their favorable reactions led to a meeting with Athletic Director Monte Johnson, and this fall Jacobs started driving on Tuesdays and Thursdays to Lawrence to work with individuals and teams.

The first step in Jacobs' program is to give a test used with all Olympic athletes. The test identifies each athlete's psychological strengths and weaknesses: attention span, ability to concentrate on performance and competitiveness.

With these identified, Jacobs can help the athlete increase attention span and concentration.

One method is visualization. If, for example, a baseball player is having trouble hitting the breaking ball because he lacks concentration, Jacobs has him visualize the ball coming to the plate, then visualize making contact with the ball. Jacobs then has the athlete use a "trigger mechanism," a word or physical movement that recalls the mental image and focuses concentration.

KU senior distance runner Tim Gundy is a case in point. At Burrton (Kan.) High School, Gundy won 11 state championships, but when he started running at KU he met stiffer competition.

"When you get to the Big Eight, there are about 20 guys as good or better," he said. "It got me down and psyched me out. I got to a point where if I couldn't win, I didn't want to finish at all.

"I'd be with the leaders, then I'd start thinking too much, and instead of maintaining my pace, I started moving back and got beat by people that shouldn't beat me."

Gundy also was plagued by muscle tension caused by anxiety.

Jacobs began with the pre-race anxieties by giving Gundy relaxation exercises. Then he worked on the tightness Gundy experienced during races.

"I would get in a race," Gundy said, "and when I'd need to get down and start running, I would get tense through my shoulders. Instead of letting me try to run through it, Andy made me aware of the tightness."

Jacobs suggested that Gundy tense his arms, take a deep breath, then relax. This "trigger mechanism" focuses attention on the tightness for a moment which causes the area to relax.

Gundy is certain Jacobs has helped his performance.

"I haven't raced well in cross country all year," he said last week. "I talked to Andy on Thursday and raced on Saturday. Saturday I ran the best race in my cross-country career."

Jacobs doesn't work only with those who are having trouble dealing with pressure. He also helps those who are performing well but want to perform better.

Another athlete he helped is former KU swimmer Tammy Thomas, the American record holder in the 50- and 100-meter freestyle.

Although Thomas was winning before she met Jacobs, she lacked confidence in her ability to be a



Sports psychologist Andrew Jacobs (left)

record-breaker.

"I was to the point," she said, "where I had all the facilities to set American records and to be that caliber of swimmer, but I needed a little push. Andy helped me break the barrier."

"He just talked to me and would make me voice things that I'd keep inside myself. I discovered that I was defeating my own purpose."

Thomas went to Jacobs in the fall of 1982 with a confidence problem. In the spring of 1983, she set two American records.

In a magazine article last spring Thomas attributed much of her success to Jacobs, but he refused to take credit for it.

"... She's the one in the pool," Jacobs said. "I can't make anybody better. They make themselves better."