

Sport psychology case study



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

DOING SPORT PSYCHOLOGY1

1. INTRODUCTION

Performing optimally on any level is daunting, but when your next paycheque depends on your performance, it adds a whole new dimension to the stress and challenges faced. By adopting more effective ways and tools to deal with these obstacles, these athletes are able to overcome these challenges and perform at their best.

3. SECTION A – Initial contact with athlete

At the beginning of January I walked into the Dojo, ready to start a new year of training, and saw a new face, sweating it out in the cage. Roeloff “ the Wolf” Scheepers, Professional EFC Fighter, had joined our Dojo. Roeloff is 28 years old and has been training in various forms of Martial Arts since he was in primary school. Roeloff relocated to Mossel Bay in December 2013 from Rustenburg, where he trained with Team Mendes for about four years. After school he joined the South African Air Force and served in Iraq with the United States Marine Corp from 2005 to 2006. A few years ago he lost his job and had to take on professional fights in order to try make a living.

Our Dojo has a lot of students and many different classes running simultaneously, and with him training for EFC 30, and me training and instructing it was quite a while before I had a chance to strike up a conversation with him. I had heard via the grapevine that he had suffered a bad loss last year due to injury, so I used this to strike up a conversation with him one night while he was taking a break. We became fast friends, and often discuss the ups and downs and challenges of fighting professionally.

Roeloff had a very hectic training schedule so he was at the Dojo at least 6 days a week, morning and night. I instruct on a Monday and Wednesday, and train Mondays to Thursdays, so I was able to chat to him at least 4 days a week. Our interactions and conversations were very casual, usually before, during and after training. As we trained under the same instructor and in the same Dojo I had plenty of opportunities to observe him training. I was also privileged enough to go to Cape Town to watch him fight at EFC 30 in June.

I found Roeloff very open and eager to chat to me about his training and challenges. He is always looking for ways to learn more and improve on his existing techniques and training and was eager to hear if I had any advice for him.

One of the biggest challenges faced by professional MMA fighters is the mental aspect of the training. The physical side of fight preparation is brutal, and if you are not mentally strong, the training can easily get the better of you. When training for a fight, cutting weight, incessant sparring, rolling, weight training and cross-fit training can really work a number on you mentally and physically. Roeloff maintains that if you are not mentally prepared and strong enough you will not make it.

One of his biggest challenges was the weight cut. Professional fighters get paid per fight, R5000 for a loss and R10000 for a win. If at the weigh in, a fighter does not make weight, his opponent has the choice of whether to fight him or not. If the opponent chooses to continue with the fight, the fighter that did not make weight has to pay his opponent 75% of his fight purse, win or lose. Because of this, some fighters go to extreme measures to

cut their weight, and there is such a fine balance between healthy methods that enhance energy and performance, and unhealthy methods that can totally sabotage the fighter. It is also very tough being on such a strict diet while your friends can eat as they please. It takes a huge amount of self-control and discipline to stick to the eating plan, and sometimes Roeloff lacks this self-control when he is not being monitored closely. He also has the tendency to get despondent when he feels he is not performing up to standard. He sets high standards for himself, and he trains and fights for his Dojo.....his instructor and fellow students..... and he does not want to disappoint us. So he puts a lot of pressure on himself.

I really enjoyed this stage of the process. Getting to know Roeloff and observing him was very interesting, and I have made another good friend as a result of it. It was very informative and a great learning curve, and allowed me to look at fighting from a different perspective.

4. SECTION B – Literature review

I did a search through various literature on enhancing performance by setting goals in order to give Roeloff some advice. Most of the studies that have been done over the years regarding goal setting and performance have been in the industrial context. It is only in the last 20 years or so that studies have been done on the relationship between goal setting and performance in sports and these studies have shown a positive correlation between goal setting and performance in sports.

Goal setting is important otherwise the athlete will not know what he is working towards. This can be demotivating in itself. Goal setting theory is

based on what Aristotle called “ final causality” (Locke, E. A., 1996).

According to Locke (1996) there are internal and external aspects to goals.

Internally they are ideas, while externally they refer to the object or condition sought, therefore the idea guides the action to attain the object.

In a study conducted with 5 rugby players, Hanton et al (2006) found that goal setting was effective in improving the rugby player’s performance.

Smith & Ward (2006) found that after Football players had set goals they performed better than they did during their baseline testing.

In a study conducted by Weinberg, Bruya, Longino and Jackson (1988) they found that the group of athletes that were given specific goals performed better than the group that was told to “ do their best”. Specific goals facilitate behaviour change more effectively than general non-specific, “ do your best” goals do. By setting specific explicit goals, the athlete knows exactly what is expected of them and what they want to achieve. This is what I believe Roeloff needs in order to deal more effectively with the challenge of trying to cut weight.

Goals should also be difficult but not unrealistic. Often for a professional fighter, the amount of weight they have to lose may seem to be impossible. Due to this impossible amount of weight to be cut, the fighter might even start believing it is impossible even before he starts his eating program, causing him to lose motivation before he even starts. This is counterproductive for any athlete trying to achieve a particular goal. It is argued by Locke (1990) that if goals are too difficult and result in failure, the

athlete will lose motivation which in turn will lead to a decrease in performance, therefore goals need to be attainable and not too difficult.

5. SECTION C – Intervention

After I had gotten to know Roeloff a bit better, I spoke to him about my assignment and studies, and that I would like to observe him and could maybe offer some advice for him to try out. He was very eager for any feedback that could help him in any way. He also feels that I would maybe see things from a different perspective than him or our instructor that could be helpful. As we both spent a lot of time at the Dojo I got plenty of opportunity to observe him while training. We often socialise outside the Dojo, so I got to know him on a personal level. I often found that just by watching and listening, I gleaned a lot of information about how he thinks and feels, and what challenges he faces.

One of his biggest issues is rigidly sticking to the eating plan set up by his nutritionist for his required weight cut. Cutting weight is a long hard process that can go on for months. It is easy to lose sight of the reason for the diet, so I suggested to Roeloff that maybe he should focus on his goals and goal setting. According to Locke and Latham (2002), a goal is “ an objective or aim of action defined as attaining a specific standard of proficiency on a task, usually within a specified time limit”. McClements (1982) has made a distinction between different types of goals, namely subjective, general objective and specific goals. Evidence suggests that certain types of goals are more useful in changing behaviour than other types of goals. Studies have also shown that explicit goals are more effective than general ‘ do your best’ goals.

Roeloff's subjective goal is to do his best, his general objective goal win his fight and his specific goal was to make a specific weight by a specific date and to win with a knock out. Roeloff's fight preparation started in earnest about 6-8 months before his scheduled fight. This is a long time to stay focused on your main goal. I suggested to Roeloff that maybe he can set himself smaller, specific, explicit goals that will lead to his main goals. Some sports psychologists (Bell, 1983; Carron, 1984; Gould, 1983; Harris & Harris, 1984; O'Block & Evans, 1984) emphasise that setting more immediate short-range goals is important. In their meta-analysis Kyllö & Landers (1995) showed the superiority of combining short- and long-term goals. Recent research has also revealed that both short- and long-range goals are needed to maintain motivation and performance (Weinberg, Butt & Knight, 2001)

By setting short-range goals, Roeloff will be able to see immediate improvement and this should enhance his motivation. By setting smaller weight cutting milestones, he will be able to see what he has done so far, and that he has achieved his short-range goal, and motivate him to make the next milestone or goal, and not lose sight of his main goal, making weight at the EFC weight in.

My interactions with Roeloff have always been in the form of casual conversations. On one particular Wednesday Roeloff and I had just finished instructing the juniors and were discussing the class when we got on the topic of his upcoming fight. I mentioned that I had been thinking about his biggest obstacle and suggested to him that he set himself smaller goals, which in turn will help him achieve his main goal. Roeloff was very responsive to my suggestions and was eager to try it out. I found it was easy

to approach Roeloff with my observations and ideas and he is always open to someone else's ideas and views.

6. SECTION D – Feedback

A few months after giving Roeloff my suggestions he came to me one night and said that he had done a little research of his own about my suggestions. He decided to give it a shot and see what happens. After all, he had nothing to lose. He set himself smaller goals that would ultimately tie in and lead to his long term goal, and while keeping his eye on the main goal, focused mostly on his short-range goals. He found that it worked well for him.

He found it easier to stay more focused, and managed to resist more temptation in the process, and sticking to his eating plan more strictly. By doing this, his weight loss was better, and he felt more motivated, and gained a little more self-confidence in his ability to achieve his goals. By being able to stick to his short-range goals, he felt far more positive about achieving his long-range goal.

Roeloff said that this is something he will be implementing on a regular basis. It helps him define his goals better and have a clearer picture of what he needs to do in order to achieve what he sets out to do.

7. SECTION E – Overall reflection

I have really enjoyed this project and the subject as a whole. I feel that I am very blessed in the fact that I train at Tiger Kai. My head instructor is friends with many professional fighters as well as some of the top trainers in the country, and this has given me the opportunity to get to know so many fine

athletes. And I was very blessed to have Roeloff relocate to Tiger Kai and allow me to use him for my project.

It was a great experience getting to work with a professional fighter on such a close level, and being given access behind the scenes of an event like EFC and the inner workings of a fighters fight camp. It has been an amazing learning experience and has deepened my interest in Sports Psychology.

I have had no illusions about the mental and physical aspects of being a fighter (as I have done martial arts myself for 13 years now), but I now I have a deeper understanding of some of the aspects that are not quite so visible to others around the fighter, and how these can also affect a fighters performance.

8. CONCLUSION

There are many factors, both mental and physical, that affect the performance of athletes. An athlete faces many challenges, both physically and mentally, which need to be overcome in order to achieve their goal, which is to be the best at their chosen sport.

Sometimes, these challenges may seem insurmountable to some athletes, but with the right type of assistance, these challenges and obstacles can be overcome.

9. REFERENCES

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