

Coach was right: 'It's all in your head'

Athletes improve performance with help from mental coaches

By POLLY CAMPBELL
 SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Kimberly Quach loved playing tennis in area clubs and at tournaments, but a questionable call by a line judge or a catty comment by an opponent would unravel the Portland attorney's game on the court and afterward.

"I would get so frustrated that it would linger with me days later," said Quach, 41. "I didn't know how to stay focused, and it was interfering with my performance."

But instead of practicing harder, Quach turned inward and began working with Mark Henry, a Lake Oswego counselor and sports psychologist, to develop her mental game.

"I wanted to learn what would work best to keep me focused," Quach said.



DOUG BEGHEL/THE OREGONIAN

Scott Rath (right) gets some tips on the mental part of his golf game from sports psychologist Mark Henry.

She learned relaxation techniques, breathing exercises and thought processes that she says ease the pressure and keep her centered and in the moment.

After a few sessions in which she talked about her challenges with tennis and practiced the mind management strategies Henry recommended, Quach began winning more. She says she has upped her level of play, improved her physical skills and is happier playing because she's more comfortable on the court.

And she has learned what elite athletes, who spend as much time training their minds for competition as they do their bodies, have discovered: Performance can be boosted by better using the mind.

"In order to be able to talk about the body and mind, we separate the two. But they are not separate. The mind is the program that runs the body,"

said Henry, 47, a former basketball player and coach.

Pay attention to the physical sensations and recognize how your body feels, Henry said. Notice where you feel tension or anxiety. How do you respond? Do you make a hasty move or berate yourself?

Once people become aware of how they react, Henry explained, they can develop positive habits through visualization, relaxation exercises, affirmations and other techniques that can help them overcome the negative feelings the next time.

Developing healthier habits has helped golfer Scott Rath, 37, raise the level of his game and win Northwest tournaments. The director of instruction at the Tualatin Country Club sought help several years ago when he grew frustrated with his putting game.

"I was really struggling. I was

Mind games

Next time you blow a serve, miss a putt or choke at the hoop, remain neutral. Observe the shot, but don't beat yourself up about it. Don't focus on it. Just breathe, relax, walk up to the ball and prepare for your next shot.

Too often people berate themselves for poor performance or focus on the negative instead of what they want to accomplish. That only sets them up for failure, says counselor and sports psychologist Mark Henry. Focus on what you want out of the next moment, and your performance likely will follow.

To learn more about sports psychology, visit www.spinw.com or www.athleticsinsight.com.

hitting the ball well, but not scoring," said Rath, who competes in dozens of golf tournaments each year as part of the Pacific Northwest Section of the Professional Golfers Association.

Now, Rath uses visualization to picture the shot before he strikes the ball, and he has learned how to identify when he's tense and is able to calm himself more quickly on the course.

The most important thing, Rath said, is to stay focused on the goal at hand and stick to your routine instead.

The mental work combined with practice has raised the level of his game, said Rath, who is also a three-time Oregon Player of the Year. "And I enjoy the game more than I ever have."

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