


No matter what kind of training regimen you use, no human being is devoid of emotion or immune to the effects of emotion; to believe otherwise is to deny your athletes' humanness, their fallibility, their susceptibility—and perhaps their most noble attribute. (Huber, 2013, pp. 311-312)



# Applying Emotion Theory in Coaching Athletes: Play an Effective Affective Game

By Graeme J. Connolly

**I**n the classic sports movie, *A League of Their Own* (Abbott & Marshall, 1992), Jimmy Dugan (played by Tom Hanks) is tasked with managing the Rockford Peaches team, which is participating in the newly formed Women's Baseball Association League. During one memorable scene, Coach Dugan barks at Evelyn, "There's no crying in baseball." Well, there is in fact crying (emotion) in baseball, and every other sport, as drama and challenges are an integral part of athletic competition. In an ensuing scene, Coach Dugan is ready to again tear into Evelyn but decides not to do so. He curbs his emotions and talks to her with more restraint, resulting in her controlling her emotions and improving her game play. Indeed, there are numerous scenes throughout the movie that depict emotional control (or lack of control) and growth, which illustrates the powerful positive (enhancing) or negative (impairing) influence that emotions can have on athletic performance. This uplifting and inspiring story is, in fact, a great example of applying specific principles of psychology and emotion theory to the coaching process. More specifically, the work of Hanin (1978, 1995, 2000a) and his individual zones of optimal functioning (IZOF) model are reflected in the movie and form the basis for this article. By exploring and developing a better understanding of the IZOF model and its applications, coaches (particularly those at the middle school and youth-sport level) can add to and enhance their "coaching toolbox" and ultimately improve their practice.

In his book entitled *Applying Educational Psychology in Coaching Athletes*, Huber (2013) examined the emotional athlete and the interesting interaction between emotions and performance. This article will focus on the theoretical underpinnings and associated practical applications of the IZOF model by utilizing carefully selected principles and concepts from Huber. This will help to simplify how coaches can teach athletes to use enhancing emotions, elude impairing emotions, sustain an optimal range of emotional functioning, and achieve elevated performance when it matters most.

The article begins by clearly defining the term emotion (within the context of athletic competition) and introducing the fascinating interplay between emotions and athletic performance. It then provides a brief overview of the IZOF model and the framework on which it is based. The article concludes by offering some preventive and coping strategies you can apply as a coach to help your athletes control their range of emotions, maximize their performance, and more successfully address the emotion-performance equation, particularly in youth sport settings.

## Emotions and Performance

Individual athletes frequently experience emotion and the powerful effect it can have on their performance. Consider the mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter who uses anger to psych himself up before a big fight and then explodes into the octagon and knocks down his opponent with a spectacular opening combination of kicks and punches. Conversely, contemplate the quarterback who becomes angry after getting sacked on two consecutive plays and then misses a simple routine throw to a wide-open receiver for a touchdown. In these instances, anger is a performance-enhancing emotion for the MMA fighter but a performance-impairing emotion for the quarterback.

People often use the word *emotion* to also describe athletic performances. For example: “The game was an emotional roller coaster with numerous lead changes.” “Emotions ran high on the field, especially during the frenetic closing minutes.” “She was in the zone and had her emotions under control down the

final stretch.” “The team’s emotional chemistry was off and their performance suffered as a result.”

Deci (1980) offered this definition of emotion:

An emotion is a reaction to a stimulus event (either actual or imagined). It involves change in the viscera and musculature of the person, is experienced subjectively in characteristic ways, is expressed through such means as facial changes and action tendencies and may mediate and energize subsequent behaviors. (p. 85)

According to Deci’s definition, an emotion is a reaction to some real or imagined stimulus that results in behavioral, physiological, or experiential changes.

## Overview of the Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning Model

The IZOF model is both a theoretical framework and a practical approach that allows for a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the functional relationship between emotions and performance (Hanin, 2000a). The development of the IZOF model was based on research assessing anxiety in several thousand athletes before competition, utilizing the Russian language version of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory to examine a general level of anxiety. Hanin’s (1978) research identified anxiety as a significant factor in athletic performance, but only at the individual level, not the group level. Therefore, the IZOF model primarily emphasizes the within-individual dynamics of subjective emotional experiences associated with performance, so that the emotional patterns associated with successful performances can be distinguished from the emotional patterns of less successful performances in each performer. “Methodologically, individually optimal (and dysfunctional) zones serve as empirically established criteria of an optimal performance state reflecting an individual’s performance history. The zones are used to evaluate the degree of similarity (or discrepancy) between actually experienced... emotional state and this optimal state” (Hanin, 2000a, p. 67). Table 1 summarizes the four primary components of the IZOF model as outlined by Hanin (2000a).

**Table 1. Components of the IZOF Model**

<b>Individual</b>	The individual is at the center of the model. Individual differences exist between athletes with regard to their emotional state and successful performances. Some athletes perform better at a higher level of anxiety, while other athletes perform better at a lower level of anxiety.
<b>Zones</b>	Athletes perform best when their emotional state is within their individual zone, or intensity level, that in the past has resulted in successful performances. The optimal level of anxiety may vary for athletes in the same sport, but the zone of optimal functioning is relatively narrow.
<b>Optimal</b>	Optimal means the most relevant and appropriate emotional state for the athlete under specific motor performance conditions. The concept of “optimal” is multidimensional; emotional state is related not only to intensity level but also to time, form and context.
<b>Functioning</b>	For athletes to perform well, they must be excited and eager (energy) but also calm enough to focus and concentrate (resources) on the specifics of performance. Functional emotions have the behavioral consequences of energizing the athlete to action and keeping the athlete physically and mentally on track. Dysfunctional emotions have the opposite effect.

## Applying Emotion Theory and the IZOF Model in Coaching Athletes

The IZOF model can be a powerful tool for coaches (particularly at the middle school and youth sport level) to positively impact their athletes and the coaching process. So, what are some strategies for helping athletes maintain appropriate emotions and remain within their zone of optimal functioning? The following sections outline specific strategies (both preventive and coping) based on the IZOF model and emotion theory that coaches can apply to improve and further develop their coaching toolbox, enhance athlete performance, and promote program excellence.

### Preventive Strategies

The simplest and most efficient way to maintain appropriate emotions and remain in the zone is to avoid inappropriate emotions. Coaches need to help their athletes recognize the importance of emotions in motor performance and encourage them to *play an effective affective game*. Seven of these important practical applications (as outlined by Huber, 2013) that help athletes utilize their most appropriate and relevant (i.e., optimal) emotions are summarized next.

#### *Accept positive emotions*

Athletes need to be who they are and embrace their own unique emotional personality. Emotions, such as anger, may work well for some athletes, but not for others. Indeed, research (Hanin, 2000b) on emotions and their effects on motor behavior suggests that both positive and negative emotions can have either optimal or dysfunctional effects on performance. Interestingly, some positive emotions (typically thought of as good for performance), such as being easygoing, excited, tranquil and relaxed, can be bad for some athletes' performance, while some negative emotions (typically thought of as bad for performance), such as feeling tense, dissatisfied, irritated and angry, can in fact be good for athlete performance. The coach needs to review the research related to positive and negative emotions (Hanin, 2000b) and encourage athletes to experience and ultimately identify the enhancing emotions that work best for them as individuals.

#### *Avoid negative emotions*

Athletes need to avoid continuing to utilize emotions that may have been moderately successful in the past but are no longer optimal for them. The coach needs to evaluate previous poor performances and associated impairing emotions and have athletes adopt a new and improved emotional approach.

#### *Find the optimal zone*

Athletes need to get in touch with their emotional limits for practice and competition performances. Ask athletes how they feel immediately before and after a competition to informally assess and get a sense of the optimal range for their emotions. Another way to assess their limits indirectly is to have them recall how they felt in past competitions—this can be particularly

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revealing when examining previous high-level and low-level performances. Often the best learning experiences with regard to emotions come on the heels of a poor performance.

In many instances, however, athletes are hesitant to honestly disclose their feelings when they perform poorly because they believe it is a sign of weakness or that their coach will think less of them if they reveal that they were nervous, uneasy or afraid. Therefore, the coach may need to be steadfast in persuading them to be open and honest about the specific emotions and range of emotions they experience during competition. Getting athletes to acknowledge that their emotions got the best of them is often the first step to establish emotional balance. Indeed, a frank appraisal of their emotional instability allows them to begin to frame the emotional problem and formulate an answer to keep them in the zone of optimal functioning.

#### *Remain in the zone*

Athletes need to continually monitor and self-regulate themselves to make sure they stay within their zone. This takes effort, practice and guidance from a coach. Occasionally a swift mental check and a short self-talk such as, "Hey, I am getting a little aggravated, so settle down and get focused again" is all it takes to get back on track emotionally. Typically, it is much simpler to stay in the zone than it is to get back in the zone. Once an athlete becomes burdened with emotional baggage it can be very difficult to let go and move on.

The nature of competition means that errors, whether big or small, are to be expected, and how an athlete reacts to a mistake will affect emotions. One means to tackle the inevitable emotional baggage that comes with competition and remain in the zone is to run through the seven Rs with athletes:

**Responsibility:** take personal responsibility for errors and do not dwell on them.

**Recognize:** be aware of the situation and take the initiative to deal with it right away.

**Respond:** take positive actions after the error.

**Release:** let go of negative emotions and move on from the error.

**Regroup:** get re-dialed in by repeating the steps needed to perform the task.

**Refocus:** zero in on the next movement and its performance cues.

**Ready:** start the pre-performance process and prepare physically, mentally and emotionally for the next movement.

This systematic process to manage the emotional highs and lows that come with athletic competition is exemplified by a successful hitter in Major League Baseball who swings wildly at a pitch before stepping out of the batter's box to collect his thoughts and ready himself to then hit the winning home run off the next pitch.

### ***Make logical and accurate appraisals***

Athletes need to make clear and accurate appraisals that produce enhancing emotions. To achieve this, the coach can show athletes credible and convincing data (e.g., statistical evidence, performance averages, video clips) that confirm their performance is close to their goal, is improving, or that with more effort they can reach their goal.

Immediately after a competition, emotions are often at their peak, so it is best to avoid rushing into quick and irrational appraisals of performance (especially poor ones!). The coach and the athletes would be much better served to wait until some

time has passed to reflect on the actual performance, when emotions have calmed down and appraisals can be made more logically and rationally.

### ***Promote achievement and attainment***

Athletes need to have a favorable expectation of success to promote enhancing emotions such as motivation, confidence and certainty. Therefore, the coach can post signs to encourage and cultivate a positive outlook for athletes (e.g., "Think Positive" and "Expect the Best"); explain the significance of expecting success; use positive comments and objective data (e.g., past successes, performance reviews, conditioning times) to recognize and highlight athletes' achievements; and acknowledge their accomplishments on a consistent basis.

### ***Rehearse and prepare for unanticipated situations***

Athletes need to learn to prepare for and deal with the unexpected, so that they can come to expect it and still maintain emotional stability. One way to do this is to teach athletes to visualize random, atypical, or demanding scenarios. In doing so, they will be better prepared to perform at a high level if one or more of those situations does indeed occur. For example, some of these scenarios could include feeling tired and regaining strength, losing ground and recovering, playing badly and regrouping, feeling sick and performing admirably, acclimatizing to extreme weather conditions, performing with a hostile crowd, adapting to a new environment, competing on a poor surface, using inferior equipment, and dealing with distractions.

By setting aside some time (10–15 minutes) after practice, the coach can begin to facilitate the process of visualization for athletes by having them lie down and envision their performances and the different scenarios they could come across dur-



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ing their performances. These visualizations could then become a part of their pre-performance routine. Alternatively, instead of picturing these situations, some athletes may prefer to simply think about the scenarios and remind themselves of the suitable responses associated with each scenario.

Another strategy to deal with the unexpected is to introduce unexpected scenarios during practice. For example, immediately before an athlete performs, the coach has a fellow teammate perform at a high level and has the rest of the team applaud in recognition of the achievement. In this situation, the athlete can rehearse having to follow an outstanding performance with one of their own. Other types of practice scenarios include a soccer player rehearsing scoring the game-winning penalty kick in a shootout, a golfer imagining having to sink a practice putt to win the tournament, and a basketball player practicing hitting the game-winning three-point shot at the buzzer.

## **Coping Strategies**

When preventive strategies are unsuccessful or it is simply too late to avoid the effects of negative emotions, coping strategies become necessary. Every athlete, and even coaches, have experienced a state of emotional disarray and the associated chaos and confusion that often ensue as a result. So, what can be done to handle such situations when they inevitably arise? How can athletes get out of this emotional mess? Five practical strategies (as outlined by Huber, 2013) are summarized next.

### ***Resolve internal tensions***

Athletes need to deal with these problems rather than ignore them and let them fester and grow into more potent problems, because, if left unresolved, they can lead to emotional imbalance and debilitating outcomes. Consequences such as fatigue (both physical and emotional), illness, or impairing emotions can be the result of inner conflict, such as when an athlete has an issue with another athlete on the team. These after-effects, brought about by emotional turmoil, can affect not only the athlete's conditioning and motor performance but also team morale, motivation and dynamics. Therefore, it is important to facilitate inner conflict resolution with athletes and encourage them to resolve issues, such as unrest with other teammates, in a mature and responsible manner. Indeed, this approach is also critical with respect to life in general, as inner conflict resolution is important for athletes' sound physical, mental and emotional health and their development into autonomous human beings.

### ***Listen to the positive voices in your head***

Athletes are often their own (sometimes unconscious) worst enemy because they are heavily influenced by the voice in their head and the negative and damaging self-talk. Explain to athletes the effect that destructive self-statements can have on their emotions and subsequent performance, and formulate more positive and directive self-statements for them to use inside and outside of practice and competition. For example, destructive statements such as, "That was horrendous" need to be replaced (sometimes forcefully) with a more positive iteration

such as, "That felt better" to flip the mental switch or at least begin to turn the tide on the negativity.

### ***Take care of body–mind and mind–body connections***

Athletes need to be made aware of the importance of taking care of themselves and the link between good health and positive and enhancing emotions. Indeed, good health promotes good emotions and good emotions promote good health. Emphasize to athletes the importance of a good night's sleep, a healthy breakfast, and adherence to designated protocols for training and rehabilitation. These critical self-care practices will help minimize injuries, promote recovery, and decrease the likelihood of athletes having to encounter impairing emotions such as depression, confusion, distress and fatigue. Thus, it is necessary to encourage athletes to take personal responsibility for their overall health and well-being, as this can result in a more emotionally balanced and positive individual who is primed to perform at their best.

### ***Sort and make sense of emotional messages from others***

Athletes and coaches need to sort through the suggestions, opinions, ideas and comments given by other stakeholders (e.g., parents, spectators, other athletes, other coaches) and listen to the ones that encourage enhancing emotions and ignore the ones that elicit impairing emotions. For example, the emotion can be jealousy: "Nice win today. But, boy the other team just wasn't up to much" (emotional message: You are not really that good, the competition was just weak). This type of statement has the potential to engender impairing emotions, so it is important to dismiss such irrelevant emotional messages. In contrast, the emotion can be positive. For example, it can be positive dissatisfaction: "I know you got a victory, but you can still go faster than that" (emotional message: I believe in your potential for excellence.) This type of statement is typically delivered by those people who have the athletes' best interests at heart and genuinely care, so it is important to be attuned to these positive and supportive messages as they can encourage enhancing emotions.

### ***Keep body language in check***

Athletes and coaches need to understand the effect that body language can have on their emotions and heighten awareness of their own body language, so they can manipulate their emotional countenance and the emotional messages being conveyed. In many instances, just having athletes modify their body language sends an intuitive appraisal message that can alter their emotions for the better. For example, having an athlete replace a facial expression that conveys fear and uncertainty with a more commanding look of determination and confidence can be a surprisingly simple but effective strategy to positively influence emotions and subsequent motor performance.

Similarly, the body language of the coach can have a powerful effect on the emotional message he or she sends to athletes. Bored, unmotivated coaches who do not care typically walk with slumped shoulders, sit through much of practice, or wear a sickening look on their face. Conversely, coaches who are up-

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beat, dynamic, and engage in practice with a smile on their face communicate to their athletes the emotions of energetic, motivated and willing. Furthermore, the effects of body language on emotions are even more important during critical moments of competition when athletes often look to their coach as the emotional barometer. Coaches with a relaxed posture, bright eyes, and a methodical walk, for example, convey the emotions of alert, confident and resolute and can help keep their athletes in their emotional zone to perform well. In contrast, coaches who move frenetically, scream at players, and have an anxious look on their face convey the emotions of panic, doubt and distress and can have a detrimental effect on their athletes' performance by moving them out of their optimal emotional zone.

There are three strategies that coaches can employ to monitor and change (if necessary) their body language, emotional countenance, and the emotional message they send to athletes. First, they can employ *body language analysis* by recording themselves coaching and then scrutinize their behavior. Such an analysis can be very insightful (even though it can be hard to watch!) and easy to do nowadays with the evolution of technology and all the tools now available to capture the action. This strategy could be further enhanced with the use of a "coaching coach" or experienced peer who could act as an independent observer and make additional recommendations. Second, make use of *observational learning* — simply view successful coaches and then copy their body language. Coaches should be sure to observe other coaches and their body language that correspond with and complement their own coaching personality. Third,

utilize *mental imagery* for changing body language. Coaches can visualize the body language they want to portray to athletes, along with the emotions associated with those physical behaviors. It can be very helpful to visualize how a coach wants to act and feel at those anticipated events or venues where high levels of stress are expected for both the coach and the athletes.

## Conclusion

Many factors contribute to motor performance success — biomechanics, periodization, skill acquisition, coach–athlete relationship, Xs and Os — but perhaps none have the potential to contribute more than the emotion factor. The emotion factor matters most because it affects all other elements of training and competition. Emotion theory has the potential to have a profound effect on coaching, athletes and sport programs. By taking an emotional approach to coaching, coaches can help athletes experience joy and bring a higher level of energy and enthusiasm to their practices, conditioning, game play, and personal interactions. The coach can become an appropriate emotional role model for athletes and have them feed off of their positive emotional state. And coaches can inspire athletes to improve future performances and help them make more accurate and optimistic reflective appraisals that truly identify the positives and send a powerful emotional message: they will eventually be successful! Emotions are part and parcel of the performance process, so a firm grasp of emotion theory and the specific practical applications of the IZOF model can help coaches to play an effective affective game and help athletes perform at their very best, especially when it matters the most.

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