



PEA model of performance

Preparation, Effort and Attitude

This model is all about focus on the controllables. Most elite athletes have experience with this approach to performance psychology one way or another. We will use the P.E.A. Model (Preparation, Effort and Attitude) in this model together with a straightforward but powerful rating/feedback system for the athlete to use that allows introspection and facilitates developmental discussions.

4.1 Introduction to Preparation

“Discipline off the field of play will lead to discipline on it”

An athlete is in control of most aspects of their preparation: How they train, studying tactics and videos, eating and sleeping patterns, using recovery time optimally, maintaining their equipment...the list goes on. It is clear that those athletes who prepare efficiently and professionally for competition give themselves the best chance of performing well even when the conditions are not optimal. Athletes who prepare well experience fewer surprises in competition and are more ready to deal with obstacles that are placed in their way. They also get the priceless peace of mind that comes from knowing they had done everything they could to give themselves the best chance of success.

4.2 Introduction to Effort

“Continuous effort, not strength or intelligence, is the key to unlocking our potential”
- Winston Churchill

Put simply, effort is how hard you work (both physically and mentally). We are all in total control of how much effort we put into a given task but that does not mean it is easy to give 100%, even when you care deeply about the result. There are countless things that can get in the way of an athlete giving

their best effort, which is why it is necessary to focus on your effort, applying such effort in a structured way to improve, just like any skill.

Effort level can be worth thinking about in all aspects of life but for the purposes of this module we will limit our focus to effort during training and competition.

4.3 Introduction to Attitude

*“If you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two imposters just the same”
- Rudyard Kipling*

Attitude, in this case, is the tendency to react positively or negatively to a circumstance. It refers to how you comport yourself during training, how you react when things get tough, how you cope with bad calls and when everything seems to be going against you. It influences your choice of action and your response to challenge, in short everything you need to be a top athlete. Your attitude is also a choice, a controllable, though perhaps the hardest of the three to control. Mindsets are established at an early age and reinforced through experience, and these heavily influence attitudes. By the time someone is involved in higher level competition they will have a set of primed attitudes and responses that will seem to them very hard to change. But change they can, and that of course takes focused, systematic work.

4.4 How To Work With PEA

4.4.1: Preparation

Leading up to Competition Day

As we noted above, within this section is included diet, sleep patterns, recovery, training loads and planning etc. In order to know where an athlete might need help optimising their preparation you first need to know what their habits are. This will come primarily from asking prompting questions to help your athlete give a detailed account of their normal pre-competition week, leading right up to the point at which their performance begins (e.g the starting whistle, or they crouch down on the blocks etc).

With each new theme they describe (training, eating, sleeping etc) it gives you a chance to zoom in and say a few words on that topic as it relates to optimum preparation. If it's clear that what you are saying is completely new to them, then you can dig into it a bit further. If they seem clued up it's just a chance for you to impart a quick shot of good advice from your own experience, to give them a little more food for thought.

So if your athlete talks about how much they train in a week leading up to a competition, you could ask if they feel fresh and ready to go at competition time. If they say 'no' or 'not always', you can talk

about the concept of tapering and say they could consider adding an extra rest day before the competition. If they say ‘yes’, you can still mention tapering and tell them a bit about your experience and say how you liked to taper before competitions.

It’s always good to add your own experience of a certain topic or issue *after* your athlete has explained the way they see it. This shows them that you have been through many of the same things, and also lets them know that either their experience is a common one or opens their eyes to the fact that others like to approach things differently, and that’s okay.

An example of this zoom in process could be:

Athlete: I usually find it hard to sleep the night before a competition. Sometimes I lie awake until 3/4 in the morning.

Coach: Okay, did you know that the most important thing is to get some good sleep in the week leading up to an event? If you’ve done that then one bad night’s sleep the night before doesn’t actually stop you from giving your best performance.

So what is your usual sleep pattern during the week?

Athlete: I usually go to bed around midnight and get up at 6am to go training.

Coach: Okay, well you know that athletes need more sleep than the average person? And the recommended sleep for an average person is 7-8 hrs/night.

Then the conversation can lead on to how to fit in more sleep, techniques to fall asleep quicker and so on.

Try and remember where you left off when you zoomed in, so that when you’ve finished talking about sleep patterns for example, you can pick up where you left off in the story of their week.

Topics to consider for zoom-in

1. Training: how much, when, how intense
2. Sleep: how much, how good, techniques to sleep better
3. Diet: what, how much, when, general rules of good nutrition and pre- / during competition
4. Rest and recovery: this is a good opportunity to talk about the importance of high quality recovery. Are they making the most of their rest time
5. Getting ready for the event: packing list, care of equipment, relevant information about event

Suggestions of questions and follow ups for this section...

1. Starting from Monday, describe what your usual pre-competition week looks like?

2. **Training**

How much training are you doing and when?

Do you keep a training log?

- o -Do you feel fresh and ready to go on competition day?
- -Should you consider a longer rest before the event?

Do you feel sharp/on the ball on competition day?

§ -Might you need to add a short technical session the day before?

3. **Diet**

Tell me a bit about your diet on training days?

- o Do you bring extra snacks around with you?
- § -What would they usually be?
- o Do you have enough energy to get you through all your training?
- o Are you adequately hydrated?

Do you have a balanced diet, containing nutritious whole foods of proteins, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, minerals etc?

What do you eat immediately post training?

Do you know about the Glycaemic index and which foods are good for longer, slow burning energy and which are good for short bursts of high energy?

Do you use supplements energy/electrolyte drinks?

- o How much, in what form?
- o Are you aware of the risks of contamination of supplements from prohibited substances?

Do you have any trouble keeping or getting to your ideal competitive weight?

Do you know what your ideal weight is?

Do you drink alcohol?

- o Do you know how much of an effect even a bit of alcohol has on your cardiovascular fitness?

4. **Sleep**

When do you usually get to bed and wake up?

- o Are you aware of how much of an impact the amount of sleep you get has on your performance?
- o Do you know what the recommended sleep is for someone your age, and that as an athlete you generally need more than the average.

Do you ever struggle to get off to sleep?

- o Do you have any techniques to help you when that happens? (reading, no-screen pre-bed period, mindfulness)

5. **Planning**

Do you find you can fit everything in that you need to do, i.e school work, training, social commitments, or do you sometimes get stressed out?

- o What could you do to help alleviate that stress in those situations?
- § Who could you talk to or ask to help?
- o Is there anything else you could do in advance to minimise the chance of it getting on top of you?

How much control do you feel you have over your own training and competition schedule?

- o Would you want to have more control?
- o What could you do about it, who to speak to

When there is something that your athlete would like to implement or do differently (e.g. gain more control of their training or start using electrolyte drinks during training, try to get them to agree to a plan of action that is specific and has a time allocation. So in the case of starting to use electrolyte drinks- get a commitment for when they are going to buy some powder and when and how they are going to use it. Then you can check in to see if they have done what they said they would.

Competition day routines

- Talk me through your competition day from the time you wake up?
- What do you like to eat at breakfast?
- How soon before the start of the competition do you arrive at the venue?
- Do you have set routine for you warm-up?
- Do you always feel completely ready when the competition starts?
- Might you need to add anything to it?
- Do you have a set mental warm-up?
- Do you always have good food and snacks with you for the whole day or do you buy what you need at the venue?
- What if the venue doesn't have the right food?
- What does your recovery look like in-between/after matches?

4.4.2 Effort and Attitude

This section is more specific than the last and consists of two parts.

Introduction to Part One

Your athlete comes up with a description of their absolute best effort and attitude. Part two: introduces the rating system which the athlete can use to assess their performance based only on the aspects included in their stated optimal effort and attitude descriptions, nothing else.

The goal of this approach is to take the focus entirely away from results and outcomes and place it firmly on the thing that will help them the most (i.e., the way they perform in the here and now). This also provides a way for the athlete to judge their performance based on the process and not just the outcome.

This approach has a number of powerful benefits:

1. Increased clarity about what their top performance actually looks and feels like (must stress “top performance” in practice or competition...many perform better in training and are then asked to describe their best ever “match” which can be a less productive exercise for that group)

2. Naturally leads to a reduction in the stress around competing, as the athlete receives continued affirmation that the only things that will help them perform their best are all entirely within their control. There is no need to worry about anything else! Through specifically focusing on those aspects of performance athletes find they are able to more consistently produce top levels of effort and attitude.
3. Greater understanding of confidence as just a feeling like any other and that they can create that feeling by starting with confident *actions*

1. Effort

Effort is between you and you.

In order to help your athlete create a description of their best effort you should ask them to think back to their best performances. They should try to describe their performance in a way that any onlooker would be able to recognise if they had the athlete's description to hand. We are not interested in the technical, tactical or mental here, this is more of a physical thing. What is their body position? In what way and how much do they move?

Another way to think about this is how do they look when they are at their most confident? What kind of actions do they make?

Different sports require effort in different ways, but every athlete should be able to describe what their best effort looks like with a little...effort. It can help to think of the opposite - what happens when things don't feel good, when motivation is low? What is the physical evidence of a low effort level? **What you're looking for here is to get down on paper roughly 3-7 points that describe different aspects of their effort.** They should all be things that the athlete has control of regardless of environmental conditions, opponent, referee or any other externality. It's probably a good idea that you, the Coach, make the notes here to allow your athlete a chance to think and talk.

It does not have to be an exhaustive list and can easily be added to and updated along the way. Indeed this list would naturally evolve over time as an athlete develops and matures. The key is that these are things that the athlete knows helps them perform better and that they are in control of.

Once you have a list your athlete is happy with, you can move on to Attitude.

2. Attitude

This is the mental side of things, but in terms of mindset rather than skills. So, using the same process as before your athlete should try and describe the kind of mindset they have when they are performing their best. Are they pumped up and excited or cool as a rock? Are they serious or playful? Do they react to unforeseen situations by giving vent to their emotions or do they let it slip off them like water off a duck's back?

It might not feel to an athlete that they are always in control of their focus, or motivation level, but given the right tools no one and nothing can stop you from forming the mindset that you want.

Another way to help them figure out the attitude they want is to ask what their ideal attitude would be, even if they had not been able to perform like that in the past. What you are looking to describe is a target attitude, which does not mean they must have experienced it in the past. Perhaps they look up to someone in their sport because of how they deal with setbacks, or someone who plays with constant, evident determination. Then those could be aspects to include here.

Again, for the purpose of this exercise, it can help to think about examples of their mindset when things have not gone well, to help identify the signs that show when they are not in the mindset that they want.

Here you should be looking for at least 2-3 points that describe your athletes best attitude.

Introduction to Part Two:

The Rating System- 5/5

Once your athlete has descriptions for their top level effort and best possible attitude (or at least a good starting point) you can introduce them to the rating system as a way of continuously and powerfully working with them.

The essence of the rating system is that now they have a method to analyse their performance purely in relation to how well they have lived up to their E&A (Effort and Attitude) descriptions.

So after each performance (training or competition) they can rate themselves on a scale of 0-5.

-‘0’ being not matching up to their descriptions in any sense at all

-‘5’ being nailing everything on the list to the best of their ability

It is very important (but also quite difficult in the beginning) to try to ignore the result or outcome when coming up with their score. This means that they could lose a match heavily and still have given a 5/5 but equally they could win easily and only rate themselves 2/5. This knowledge offers the athletes a sense of freedom from the shackles of result-orientation that can have a profound impact on their performances.

This is not the end of the process, though. The questions that follow are perhaps more important than the rating itself. The order of questioning goes-

1. What is my score?
2. What made it more than a '3' and why wasn't it quite a '5'? (for the case of answer '4', to the first question)
3. What do I need to do to raise it at least one point next time?

This process of questioning can happen in the athletes head or it can be lead by a coach, teammate or you, the Coach. It can be done *hot*, during or immediately after matches/performances or *cold*, some longer time afterwards.

It could be useful for your athlete to share this approach with a coach or teammate, someone who will be present with them during training and competition and can challenge them in the moment to answer these questions. But you could also consider going through this process in your Coaching sessions, looking back at recent performances.

This does not replace technical and tactical feedback and analysis, but is rather meant to complement them. This approach to reflection is especially powerful in the case of repeated performances, where an athlete has time to reflect before performing again.

Now it is a question of checking in with your athlete to ask how their experience has been with the E&A rating system and exploring it further through conversation.

Bonus Section: The 3 R's of Re-focus

This is a simple and useful technique to help your athlete deal quickly and efficiently with all manner of distracting thoughts which lead on to unhelpful emotions. This is a 3-step process, also called the 3-R's.

1. Recognise the distracting thought
2. Respond (challenge) with logic (what is reality / what is true / what is actually happening in the body)
3. Replace with helpful thought

Step 1. Distracting thoughts come in many forms, from result- or confidence-orientated thoughts to thoughts about externalities such as weather conditions or the referee. Recognising those distracting thoughts is not always as easy as it sounds but as a skill it can be improved by doing mindfulness training and also by using the following mental preparation .

Step 2. Although there are countless, different distracting thoughts they can all effectively be dealt with using the same process. The first step is to respond to (i.e., challenge) them with logic, preferably with a logical response that has been prepared in advance.

The best way to help your athlete prepare is to get them to do a simple (and ongoing assignment). Ask them to write down every distracting or unhelpful thought they have encountered during competition or performance and then write the corresponding logical response to it.

So an example could be

Thought: *I need to win this one to climb higher in the world rankings*

Logical response: *That may be true but thinking about the result is not going to help me perform my best right now. What will help me perform my best is.... (leads to step 3)*

The next time that thought pops into their head they have their response prepared and ready to deploy. They should start to build up a list of all possible thoughts like this so that eventually they have a primed response to each and every one. Many of the responses will be similar or the same. If they stick to this method of responding with logic every time they have an unhelpful thought then eventually their subconscious will grow tired of throwing up those thoughts and their mind will become a more peaceful place. That is the ideal state to be able to attend only to the things that will help them perform their best.

Step 3. Having responded with logic, as we saw above, the next step is to replace the unhelpful thought with a helpful one. That is why this section is all about re-focus, because it is not enough just to bat away unhelpful thoughts. Much more effective is to bat them away and then immediately turn their attention to the things that will help most, *refocusing* their attention. And what will help them the most, at least in the period of time right before and during performance, is their effort and attitude descriptions!

Idea: Write logical responses as a mental warm-up prior to competition.