The link between social support and enhanced performance

How to use it to your advantage

"Ongoing support of friends and family is one of the most important factors influencing sports performance. While training, tactics and luck all play a part, the encouraging words or kind gestures of a partner or friend can make the difference between a footballer scoring that winning goal or a sprinter achieving a record time. The encouragement and support of friends and family clearly plays a massive part in building confidence, which is so important when the pressure is on."

— Dr. Tim Rees

"I knew that however I performed, my parents would still love me."

— Greg Louganis, when asked what he was thinking about just before diving for a gold medal

"You know what is funny? I knew that this would be televised all over the world, that hundreds of millions of people would be watching, and I knew that there were tens of thousands of people in the stands, but all I could think about was my family. I was wondering what they might say when I was done. I don't think friends and family realize how important they can be to a performance. Knowing I could count on their support grounded me, and kept me focused on my job. I feel bad when I hear all the stories of families or friends who create stress for their athletes, because my friends and family helped me succeed."

— Successful Summer Olympian

Joe Slowinski, a Top 100 coach, is a full time coach at the Kegel Training Center and the Head Coach of the Webber International University bowling program. The Portland Maine native is the former Director of Coaching and Coach Certification for the National Sports Council of Malaysia. Visit his coaching site at www.bowlingknowledge.info and send him questions at joe.slowinski@kegel.net

Recent research on the impact of a player's social support system reveals a significant link between the quality and quantity of social support and maximizing sport performance. A lack of social support during training or competition can undermine performance quality, while the presence of perceived social support can maximize performance in a major competition.

Accordingly, I'd like to discuss the importance of social support on peak performance. To begin, I will share recent research on how social support can substantially enhance performance, and where a lack of social support can inhibit and undermine performance quality. Whether it is the USBC Open tournament, a PBA regional, the collegiate national championships, the World Championships or Junior Gold, perceived and received social support is an important element of getting the most out of any event where you want to maximize your tournament performance.

What the research says

What is the effect of social support from family, friends, teammates and coaches? The research shows a clear link between the quantity and quality of social support and enhanced performance. Accordingly, as elite bowlers, we need to be aware of this and use this knowledge to our advantage.

Research on the impact of social support has revealed that stressors reduce performance and social support enhances performance as well as acts as a buffer to stressors. This would seem intuitive, but most players don't take this area as a serious training and competition issue. Yet, the research base on this subject is evolving and revealing how powerful social support can be on an individual's performance quality. The research reveals that the presence of social support is a predictor of improved performance over those who do not have an adequate amount of social support from family, friends and significant others. This is seen in both Olympic teams as well as high performing individual sports.

In the Olympics, successful teams that met or succeeded their performance expectations were significantly more likely to mention social support from family, friends as well as crowd support as a major contributor to the team meeting their performance goals. Under-performing teams noted a lack of social support. These were defined as teams that failed to meet their performance goals at the Olympics. Specifically, on the successful Olympic teams, positive social support involved the players educating parents and friends on their training and competition demands of being on an elite world-class high performance team and how to enhance their Olympic experience with specific social support. Moreover, the successful teams had communication plans that enabled the athletes to communicate with family and friends in ways that did not interfere with the team's or individual's preparation or focus for the competition. In many of these cases, the coach met with parents and informed them how to be an effective resource for the athletes.

A study of 197 British male amateur golfers, all who played at a high level, social support proved to be a direct correlate to improved performance, especially in stressful situations. These 197 players had handicaps ranging from 2 to 4. Specifically, in the study, the research revealed that social support was equivalent to an improvement of one stroke. Conversely, for those with the least amount of social support, their lack of social support led to a deterioration of performance of up to 3 strokes per round. The impact of stress was clear. Those who had support dealt much better, and performance improved.

In an effort to study the impact of targeted social support, one study investigated the impact of three golfers who were provided with targeted and specific social support such as listening to problems, offering encouragements, as well as logistics help such as finding hotel accommodations for a player. A pre/post study revealed that the social support was equivalent to an average of 1.78 stroke improvement after receiving the support. In one individual case, a golfer improved by more than 3 strokes after receiving the 1-on-1 social support.

From the research, it is clear that bowlers could benefit from both seeking support and accepting social support from family members, peers and coaches.

Getting the most out of your support system

As the research reveals, having a strong social support system is essential to being at your best. Accordingly, here is some advice in two specific areas to help you be at your best. The first involves being proactive and seeking support from your network of friends, family and other loved ones. The next is to be proactive in discussing your competition and training needs with them well in advance, in order to avoid any potential problem while training or in competition.

Be proactive

Be proactive in seeking support from family, friends and significant others. To become your best, it is clear that the presence of social support is a necessary component of getting the most out of your bowling career. But this requires you to be proactive

in seeking help when encountering difficulties. This step will yield dividends in the long run, but you must be willing to ask for help.

A research paper published this year reveals the importance of being proactive in seeking social support when encountering problems and setbacks. Specifically, in this long-term study of adolescent males who in the future, as adults, were either successful or unsuccessful making it to play professionally in the top English and Dutch professional leagues, those who made it to play at the top professional levels were significantly more proactive in seeking social support when encountering problems. This study of 84 players reveals the importance of social support on reaching the top of a sport.

In another study, of 123 high performing golfers, both received and perceived support acted as a buffer to stressors leading to an improvement in playing performance. Both studies indicate the importance of reaching out to your family, friends and significant others when you experience difficulties in both your life and bowling.

Discuss your competition and training needs well in advance

"It was really important for me to know that my parents were there to see me wear the Team USA uniform in the Olympics, and see me compete. It felt like a way that I could pay them back for everything they had done to help me. On the other hand, my parents are not part of my normal program at competitions, and especially at the Olympics, I wanted things to be normal. We had to talk about how I couldn't really see them at all until I was done competing. This was very hard for me because I didn't want to seem ungrateful to my parents, and they didn't know how much little things like the wrong question could upset me under pressure. They had never really seen me with my competition face on, and I didn't want to have to explain."

– Medal Winning Olympian

"My mom used to get so freaked out at my competitions, that she would have to leave the stands and go to the ladies room. If she started to hear the crowd, she would go into a stall and start flushing the toilet to drown out the noise. After a while, we decided that maybe she shouldn't come to the competition at all. especially high pressure events like the Olympic Trials. It was better for her and me."

– National Team Member

In both of these athletes' experiences, you could easy substitute wife, husband, boyfriend, girlfriend or parent. These highlight the reality of those supporters who want to be there at the most important moments. But, this requires a structured approach to how your supporters can help you at an important tournament.

As I hope I've shown readers, social support is incredibly important in maximizing performance, but even with good intentions, that help can quickly inhibit performance at your most important event. Major tournaments tend to have more supporters attending. Your supporters might not understand how to be available for you in a helpful manner prior to and during the event.

As I discussed earlier, the successful Olympic teams educate friends, family and significant others on how they can be an asset to the player or the team, specifically with details on how to communicate with the players in a way that would not impact their preparation prior to the event and focus during the event.

Otherwise, friends, relatives, parents and significant others can be major distraction at tournaments. Be sure to discuss the importance of the tournament with them well in advance. Discuss how they can be a resource, helping you be at your best, with specific help during the event. Be very specific in your discussions and have them well in advance of the tournament. How do you want to communicate during the event to prevent distractions? What can they do before, during, and after to help you? What actions in the past caused you to be distracted? The more detailed you are with your requests and expectations, the more likely you will convey the information you need them to understand, and you will help them be prepared to be a support system rather than a distraction.

References

Freeman, P.; Rees, T.; Hardy, L., (2009). An Intervention to Increase Social Support and Improve Performance. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* Vol. 21(2):186 - 201.

Freeman, P. & Rees, T (2008). The effects of perceived and received support on objective performance outcome., *European Journal of Sport Science* Vol 8 (6):359-368.

Gould, D.; Guinan, D.; Greenleaf, C.; Medberty, R.; Peterson, K. (1999). Factors affecting Olympic performance: perceptions of athletes and coaches from more and less successful teams. *Sport Psychologist* Vol. 13 (4): 371-394

McCann, S. How Can Olympic Friends and Family Help Olympians Perform Their Best? *United States Olympic Committee.*

Rees, T.; Hardy, L. and Freeman, P. (2007). Stressors, social support, and effects upon performance in golf., *Journal of Sports Sciences* 25(1): 33 – 42.

ScienceDaily (Mar. 3, 2009). Why Sporting Heroes Should Thank Their Friends.

ScienceDaily (May 2, 2009). Emotional Support Leads To Sporting Success.

Van Yperen, N. W. (2009). Why Some Make It and Others Do Not: Identifying Psychological Factors That Predict Career Success in Professional Adult Soccer. *Sport Psychologist* Vol. 23 (3):317 – 329.