

Motivation and Hippocrates – Understanding Your Players.

By Dave Hadfield

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The pronoun 'he' has been used throughout this article, merely for convenience and ease of reading. Please read "he" as "he or she".

In my experience over the years, I would have to say that motivation is perhaps the most misunderstood phenomenon in the psychology of sport. I suppose we sport psychology types have got a fair bit to answer for here, as I believe we haven't succeeded as well as we should have in getting our educational message across to the sporting world. I still come across coaches (happily, less frequently) who think that a sport psychologist is essentially a 'motivator'. I still occasionally run into people who say to me, "Motivation, Dave. That's what you do isn't it? Motivate people." Well, no mate, that's not what I do. Not most of the time, anyway.

I will leave the topic of what sport psychology and sport psychologists have to offer for another time, but I would like to spend a bit of time having a practical look at motivation, what it means to you as a coach, and what you can do (if anything) to assist the motivation of your players. I don't intend to give any academic treatise here, but rather cut to the chase and try to give you something to get your teeth into.

Motivation is a complex issue, but one way to think of the concept is in terms of three things – **direction**, **effort** and **persistence**. *Direction* refers to what we are motivated towards doing or being. Some young people are motivated to be the staunchest bloke in the neighbourhood, to be the best dope smoker or to set the fastest time for drinking a yard of ale. Others are motivated to be the best rugby player they can be, to represent their club, their union or their country and to improve their performance weekly to achieve their goals. It's all motivation, it's just that people are motivated in different directions and by different things. Of course, if a player is motivated to be the best yard glass drinker and the best open-side flanker, then clearly the two will be in conflict. The yard glass would have to go!

Effort is pretty self-explanatory. It is about how much time, energy, commitment – how much 'oomph' we put into what we are focused on achieving. *Persistence* is also reasonably self-explanatory. How resilient is a player in the face of obstacles? If he misses out on selection for the team he has been striving to make, does he say to himself that the selectors are stupid, that they couldn't pick their nose, let alone a team, and go into a funk? Or does he think, "Well, I can't control the selectors' minds and decisions, but I can control my own effort and performance. I'll work so hard and get so good that

they just won't be able to leave me out next time". Then he goes out and gets stuck in. That's persistence.

If that's a brief (and very simplistic) definition of motivation, then how can you as a coach help your players? The first thing is to have some understanding of what motivation is and the second thing is to understand two other important things. First is that everybody is different and that they have multiple motives; and the second is that individual motivation changes over time. Already you should be starting to wonder about your good old team talk, delivered with passion and suitable information some time before that game starts, and figure how well your speech fits in with or addresses the aspects of motivation I have mentioned. I will look at team talks in another article, but if everybody is different, then what are some of the common things that tend to motivate athletes?

Research indicates that there are indeed some common factors in young people's motivation to play sport. Among these are:

- Fun and enjoyment.
- Affiliation – enjoying the company and comradeship of team-mates.
- Achievement – making teams, performing well, winning, status, recognition.
- Fitness and health.

The first two and the last one are reasonably straightforward, but it is worthwhile taking a closer look at 'achievement'. Achievement means different things to different people. For one player it may be gaining some self-esteem from being good at sport. This player may have been labelled a failure at school and at other aspects of life, but gains valuable self-esteem from his sporting accomplishments. In my experience, sporting success can play a vital role in aiding the development of self-esteem and confidence in youngsters, but of course rugby shouldn't be the only thing that offers self-esteem. A young person with a balanced self-concept may also think of himself as a family member (son, daughter), friend, student, worker, lover, a spiritual being, musician and, hopefully, a good and worthwhile person.

There has also been a long-running debate in New Zealand sport about the winning versus participation issue. Some educators (and sport psychologists) have, I think unfairly, been labeled as tree-huggers and dolphin-strokers for suggesting that we should focus on teaching youngsters skills and above all that we should make sure they are enjoying themselves. The implication has been, in the minds of some, that we think that winning isn't important and that this approach has produced a generation of soft kids, who are 'namby-pambies', nowhere near tough enough and lack the killer instinct. Frankly, I reckon that criticism is at best simplistic and at worst, rubbish! The very nature of the word *sport* implies competition and competition produces winners and losers. That is the nature of sport by its very definition. Going out for a mountain bike ride on your own is leisure; taking part in a race organized by your local club is sport. Kicking a ball round with your mates is leisure; playing in a rugby game is sport. I don't think Kiwi kids

are any less competitive than they were when they get out on a rugby field. They may not be as physically tough as they were in the 50s and 60s (there were no TV, computers and play stations when I was a kid), but they know what winning is and they are keen to win.

But winning is not everything. I remember having a debate with someone years ago who reckoned winning was all that counted. So I said to him, “OK, you’re coaching a good under nineteen team. I’ll arrange fixtures for your season to be played against under sixteen teams. Your boys will win every game by at least a hundred points to nil. How much satisfaction will they get out of that?” Of course the answer is that they’d soon get sick of it. Challenge is clearly a big part of motivation for most – pitting your skills against your peers, improving with every game and becoming better than before.

So how can you ensure that you assist your players to retain and even enhance their level of motivation? Well, the first thing is to remember what the father of modern medicine, Hippocrates, said over two thousand four hundred years ago in *The Epidemics*. “As to diseases, make a habit of two things - to help, or at least *do no harm*.” He was talking to Greek doctors, but if you substitute *rugby* for *diseases*, the same advice applies to all coaches when it comes to dealing with players’ motivation. If you can’t enhance motivation, at the very least do not damage the motivation that already existed when the player turned up to play for the team you are coaching. It may sound a bit tough, but think about it. Ask yourself if your coaching is helping your players to improve their skills, their decision-making, their health and their enjoyment of training and games. If you can answer “Yes” to that (and you’re correct!), then I take my hat off to you – you’re doing a damn fine job and we need more of you around the place. If you sometimes wonder whether you’re turning a player off or you’re not really reaching him with your coaching, ask yourself - what does this player want to get out of playing? Why did he turn up at the start of the season to play rugby? To use a modern business expression – what bang did he expect for his bucks (and I’m not talking about Shelfords or Andersons here)?

If you can answer this question, you’re well on the way to being able to be able to motivate your players, and you’re far more likely to “do no harm”. While powerful, emotive pre-game talks may inspire some of your players, and may raise their arousal levels, the biggest tool you will ever have as a ‘motivator’ is the knowledge about why each of your players is playing. If you have some idea of that, you can try to make sure that your coaching is satisfying these needs and you can appeal to this aspect when talking to your players before games. A simple technique is to hand out a piece of paper at the start of the season (the wording will alter according to the age and sophistication of your team) that looks something like this:

As your coach, I want to find out what makes you guys tick and what you want to get out of your rugby this season so I can do a good job of coaching you. Simply put a ring around the number that indicates how important each of the following factors is to you:

<i>Having fun at training.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>Having fun playing games.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>Improving my skills.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>Being with my mates.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>Getting “Player of the day.”</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>Winning.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>Keeping fit and healthy.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>Being respected by the team as a good player.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

It’s not very scientific, but you’ll be surprised at how much useful information you will get back from this simple exercise. Obviously, the better you can get to know your players, the more you will find out about their intrinsic motivators and the better you will be able to use that information to appeal to your players for a big effort. Many of you have limited time with your players and this little sheet of paper can give you a head start. The player who scores high in “being with mates” is likely respond well to, “Come on Rangi, the boys need a big one from you today. You know how much they respect you – well they really need a big game from you. You’re good enough and the boys really need you”. Another player may respond well to, “Just get out there and enjoy yourself, Fred. You’ve got great skills and I want to see you using them today. Enjoy the sun on your back and the wind in your hair. Have a real crack, son!”

Of course, motivation changes over time and the things that motivate players when they are seven or eight years old will likely be different from their motivation when they are fourteen and playing in their college team, twenty-one and just having made an NPC team, or in their last year of Super 12 before heading off to an overseas contract. But as a coach, your ability to ‘get inside the head’ of your players and understand why they are playing, what they want to get out of it and what they actually are getting out of it will largely determine how effectively you coach them, assuming they have all the other skills. Knowing this information will allow you to adjust your coaching to fit the individual and will allow your to direct your motivational comments at what you know are the players’ core motivators. Your words are far more likely to hit the target if you know where you are aiming. You will also need to make sure that you are creating a team environment that the players are enjoying and that your training sessions are not only providing the players with what they need to develop technically and tactically, but also that they are interesting and stimulating. It’s a big order, but I know you can do it and that many of you are already achieving it. If you need help on any of this, ask your local RDO or any knowledgeable coach.

I hope the season has gone well or, if you are still playing when you read this, is going well. Keep up the good work and remember what Hippocrates said – “*First do no harm*”. It’s a great start for doing some real good!