PRIMING

Setting the scene for a great lesson

“Always remember the tremendous power you have as a coach to help another human being maximize their potential; pursue this awesome responsibility daily with intensity and integrity.”
Dr Harvey Schiller, Former Executive Director US Olympic Committee

This quote hangs above my workstation for me to read every afternoon before I hit the court. I let the inspirational messages soak into my mind and I am PRIMED to create a great environment for my tennis kids.

Another inspirational coach I know has a playlist of her favourite and most uplifting songs she puts on in the car before coaching. She is PRIMED to perform and meet the challenges each coaching session presents.

Priming is a powerful psychological concept. It is an implicit memory effect in which exposure to one stimulus influences our response to another stimulus. By being exposed to inspirational words, or music or video; we can prime ourselves to behave in an inspirational way on the court.

Examples of priming are all around us. When marketers use cool, attractive, young people to brand their products; they are priming us to feel cool, young and attractive when we try that product. As with all implicit, or unconscious acts, priming is very powerful and much more powerful than we think it is.

And studies are now emerging to show the positive impact priming can have in the domain of sport.

The Research

- People who read words associated with athleticism over performed in a physical test; compared to people who read words associated with the elderly.
- Athletes primed by a combination of motivational music, images and words experienced greater aerobic and anaerobic performance; and positive emotions.

Nick Kyrios is on to something when he walks on court with headphones.

Kid’s tennis is evolving!

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• Teams who were primed by reading words implying co-operation and interdependence performed better than teams who read words with individualistic associations.

• And most interesting for tennis coaches, players who were positively primed by using positive words like “smooth, “skilful” and “cool” performed more skilfully under pressure.

The research is showing us that even the most subtle use of words can have a positive impact on the performance of our athletes. What language are you using in your lessons? Are you encouraging, friendly and energetic in your tone. Or are you lethargic, sarcastic or negative to your students.

Positive and Negative Priming
Priming works both ways. People who are primed in a positive way perform better. Those primed in a negative way perform worse.

If your language includes words like “poor”, “slow” or “breakdown” your players will unconsciously drop their skills level.

If a parent blames a coach, an umpire or team mates then they are likely to develop individualistic athletes who play the victim in the face of challenge. I’m sure we can all identify with pro athletes who show these tendencies.

Do everything in your power to ensure your environment is free from any negative priming influences. Train your coaching team to be eternally positive and optimistic. Encourage your parents to be great supporters of their kids and encourage teamwork over individual performance every chance you get.

What to Do
Watch your language – Fill your communication with positive words and emphasis on respecting team mates and opponents. Post motivational mantras around your club house. At the National Tennis Centre in Australia the athletes are surrounded by motivational quotes.
Imagery – Fill your club house with posters of all the inspiring role models in the sport of tennis. Find images of players celebrating a victory, straining to reach the impossible shot or putting all their energy into a stroke. Your National tennis magazine will have lots of examples.

Video – In an age of iPhones and tablets we can play video for our kids before lessons to get them in a great state. You can start with TennisTV on YouTube which has the highlights packages from the recent tournaments; or just search the kids favourite players and a range of video will show up.

Music – At my sons local primary school they don’t have a school bell. They play uplifting music to signal the start of a new school day. Tracks like “Best day of my life” and “Soul Sister” blast out over the loud speaker. You should see those kids run to class. Try it at your club to announce the start of a new session – see what the result is.

Key messages
- Prime yourself before your coaching session.
- Thoughtful, consistent use of positive language can reap great benefits.
- Equally, negative language can produce an undesirable result.
- Priming is an unconscious act, it is happening whether we mean it to happen or not. Mind every part of the environment you are creating to ensure positive priming is at play.

Coaches Challenge
- Search “Inspiring Tennis Quotes” on Google and find one that appeals to you and post it up on the club notice board. Number #1 on the search engine “I play each point like my life depends on it.” Rafa Nadal.
- Find some copies of your national tennis magazine and stick some posters up around the club house.
- Go to your iTunes account or Spotify (for free music) and design a playlist of your favourite tunes. Listen on the way to coaching this week and notice how your energy on court is.

Resource Section
Read these two articles from the Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology for deeper analysis of how priming can operate in the sporting sphere.

Effect of Priming on Cooperation or Individualism in a Collective and Interdependent Task

Priming as a means of Preventing Skill Failure under Pressure

Another good resource is the article:- Priming for Performance in The Sporting Life section of Psychology Today

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