

BATON TWIRLING: A SPORT OF COMMUNICATION

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Each member moves in near perfect synchronization. Each movement is fluid and beautiful. Every element that is performed is precise. Throughout the entire four-minute routine every member is in character and demonstrating their greatest skills and athleticism. This is a baton twirling team. Although baton twirling isn't always looked at as a sport, it takes just as much practice, skill, and communication as it does for a professional football team and this shows that baton twirling truly is a sport.

Communication is a significant part of all sports, including baton twirling. Without communication how would a football team know what play to run, or which player will be able to successfully execute a play once he gets the football? How would basketball players know which player to guard, or who is to attempt the shot? How would baton twirlers be able to perform in synchronization, or accurately toss the batons to each other? The list goes on and on; there are an infinite number of reasons why athletes need communication to succeed in their sports. Baton twirling in particular is a sport in which it is extremely important for teammates, coaches, and other athletes to communicate with each other. Baton twirlers use many different types of communication in their sport; intrapersonal, interpersonal, nonverbal, and mass communication are all types of communication that are seen in the sport of twirling.

Intrapersonal communication is defined as, "...the process of using messages to generate meaning within the self" (Harter 18). In sports, intrapersonal communication is most commonly used for mental preparation, or to talk oneself through a performance, game, or competition. "Sport psychology is sometimes called mental preparation or training, mind games, or mind over matter" ("Sport Psychology Mental Preparation and Training for Football or Soccer"). Mental preparation is an important part of sports

training, for proper sports skills cannot be managed without sport psychology because it complements an athlete's physical skills. "Mental training is important for athletes, whether striving to do their personal best or competing against others" ("Mental Preparation and Training"). P. Neck and Charles C. Manz in their article in the Journal of Organizational Behavior, entitled "Thought Self-Leadership: The Influence of Self-Talk and Mental Imagery on Performance," relate mental preparation to the children's story Little Blue Engine and the train saying to itself, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can..." as it was working to overcome a difficult task. It is important for athletes to think and believe that they can succeed so, like the Little Engine that could, they will be more likely to succeed. If they doubt their ability they will fail in their efforts.

Many baton twirlers agree that the purpose of mental preparation for a performance or competition is to get in the zone of the routine. In other words, mental preparation prepares the athlete to physically perform the optimal routine. Kristen Sparks, a twirler of eleven years who has competed at numerous national and international competitions and who is a member of the baton twirling team Legends based out of California, says that it is extremely important to mentally prepare and to focus on the competition. An athlete must block out any distractions that may get in the way of that competition and performance. Elizabeth Wilson, who has twirled for eleven years at a number of national and international competitions and is a member of the 2007 World Baton Twirling Federation's World Cup Silver medalist team Encore Baton Club, explains the importance of mental preparation, "You have to put yourself in the right mind set so that you can achieve your goal, and if you do not mentally prepare before you take the floor, then this is not possible."

Jennifer Marcus, a baton twirler of 21 years who has been to numerous national and international competitions and won numerous titles at the state, regional, national, and international levels including the 2006 and 2007 title World Cup Silver Medalist in Senior Women's Freestyle, states "Competing requires at least 50 percent mental soundness and 50 percent physical. While an athlete may practice and perfect his or her routines each training session, if you are not prepared mentally for the nerves, crowd, environment, and other outside effects, then you will not perform at your best."

Barry Kerr, a sports psychologist, describes three stages of sports competition mental preparation for weightlifting, which are very similar to the mental preparation stages in baton twirling: the pre competition phase, the competition phase, and the post competition phase:

The pre competition phase should be concerned with using techniques to avert distractions, become settled and certainly to focus on the venue, the athlete's own mental state at the time and to avoid all other thoughts. The competition phase implies having strategies in place to optimise the mental state of the athlete and to ensure that the focus is on making the best possible lift and not on winning. If an athlete does the best lift possible then the winning will take care of itself.

Research shows clearly that focusing only on winning will detract from an optimal performance. This is one of the reasons why athletes may lift better in training than in competition. The post competition phase is an individual one. Some athletes like to be on their own and consider their performances whilst others prefer to talk to their coach or other competitors. Most essentially, in this

phase, focus of attention should only be on the positive aspects of the performance and how they can be improved. (Kerr)

There are many different ways that athletes mentally prepare for their performances. According to a source related to soccer players, some performance-enhancing techniques include relaxation and breathing, imagery, concentration, and confidence building through positive self talk and team building” (“Sports Psychology Mental Preparation and Training for Football or Soccer”). The Special Olympics website gives a vivid example of a coach walking an athlete through mental preparation before a performance, game, or competition:

Ask the athlete to sit in a relaxed position in a quiet place with few distractions.

Tell the athlete to close their eyes and picture performing a particular skill. Each is seeing him/herself on a large movie screen on a football pitch. Walk them through the skill step by step. Use as much detail as possible, using words to elicit all the senses — sight, hearing, touch and smell-soft foot, cushion, keep it close, toe down, light touches. Ask the athlete to repeat the image. Picture rehearsing the skill successfully, even to the point of seeing the ball going in the goal. (“Mental Preparation and Training”)

Baton twirling coach Vance Vara uses this technique with his twirlers frequently. He tells his athletes to visualize themselves performing the best routine possible. He has his athletes close their eyes and listen to the music that they are to perform to, watching themselves in their minds doing the perfect routine. He has them picture the perfect baton work from the perfect release to the perfect catch, dance work from the perfect toe point to the perfect leg extension, and even simple things like the perfect smile. Using

visualization as a tool for mental preparation is an extremely important technique that many coaches, including Vara, have their athletes perfect because it helps them get their bodies and minds ready for performing to their best abilities.

There are different ways that twirlers mentally prepare for competition. Emily Hogan, a twirler of eight years, says that she prepares by blocking everything out of her head and thinking only about the task at hand. While she is in this mental state she doesn't physically execute any twirling tricks. She just sits back and thinks about the routine that she is about to perform. Many twirlers use music to relax and concentrate in preparing for a performance. It is very common to walk around a venue at which a baton twirling event is being held and see many athletes concentrating with headphones in their ears. Some use this music as a way to distract themselves from the pressure of the competition. Some listen to enjoyable, upbeat music to get their bodies and minds pumped up and ready for the competition. Others listen to the music that they are to perform to and they visualize the routine in all of its perfections, as do Vara's athletes.

Jennifer Marcus mentally prepares herself during practice as well as at the competition. She says that during practice, "I imagine the crowd, scenery, gym characteristics...and the feeling I normally have before I compete." She prepares this way on competition days also, but she adds mental run-throughs, where she visualizes every movement, to her rituals. By doing this she feels comfortable with all the noises, ceiling heights or constrictions, or any other possible effects of the competition because she has mentally mastered the components prior to the actual competition. By doing this before, she takes a lot of the pressure off the competition which allows her to truly concentrate on her twirling, rather than all of the other distractions.

These are all common techniques for athletes preparing to compete in individual events, but since there are team events in baton twirling, twirlers must also be able to mentally prepare with teammates. Wilson says, "...with team you are together. Therefore, what I do affects everyone, not just myself." Many of the same techniques are used for team competitions as are used for individual athletes. For instance, Hogan prepares with her teammates through group run-throughs and trust circles to build a connection with all of the members of the team. Her teammates will stand in a circle and put their arms up around each other, trusting that no one will let anyone fall out of the circle when they take turns leaning back. Another trust technique that teams and pairs use is when one athlete falls into another's arms completely trusting that the other will catch them. If teammates can trust each other to catch each other when they fall, they can trust that they will do their absolute best out on the competition floor.

Many teams use pep talks or chants to unify the members and mentally prepare them for their performance. Synergy, the 2008 United States Twirling Association Sr. Dance Twirl Team National Championship team, prepared for their gold medal performance with a chant "To the left, to the right, front, back, SYNERGY." This helped bring the team together and got the entire team pumped up for the performance they had long practiced for. This was reflected in their victorious, top placement.

Interpersonal communication, "...the process of using messages to generate meaning between at least two people in a situation that allows mutual opportunities for both speaking and listening" is also a major type of communication in sports (Harter 19). PsychologyCampus.com gives a list of helpful interpersonal communication tips for sports:

1. Be direct.
  2. Be complete and specific.
  3. Be clear and consistent.
  4. State your needs and feelings clearly.
  5. Separate fact from opinion.
  6. Focus on one thing at a time.
  7. Deliver messages immediately.
  8. Avoid hidden agendas.
  9. Be consistent with nonverbal messages (expressions, body language, gestures).
  10. Reinforce with repetition.
  11. Make the messages appropriate to the receiver's level of understanding.
  12. Look for feedback that your message was received accurately.
- ("Communication in Sports")

Athletes must be able to communicate with their coaches. Coaches wish to motivate the athletes they work with and to provide them with information that will allow them to train effectively and improve performance ("Communication Skills"). This motivation and information must be given to the athlete through proper communication between the athlete and coach. Vara says that speaking calmly with each other aids in good coach-to-athlete communication, while yelling, screaming, or talking sarcastically produces poor communication between the athlete and coach. Melissa Marcus, a twirler of many years and the current coach of Synergy Baton based out of Miami, Florida, explains that there must be an open communication between the athlete and coach to

produce the best athlete and performance and that as a coach she tries to keep this line of communication as open as possible with her athletes.

Wilson also describes the importance of open communication with her coach, “Communication with your coach is so important because if you are having trouble with something you have to tell your coach or they will never know! Also, telling your coach how you are feeling is important because she can help you to feel more comfortable.”

Vara elaborates, “When an athlete is talking calmly with an even voice, the exchange is two way. However, when a coach is hollering at the athlete or vice versa, it causes friction between them.” When there is poor communication between an athlete and a coach it causes much friction, and when that poor communication is happening in the presence of other athletes it can cause problems for a team as a whole.

Jennifer Marcus describes the communication that she has with her coach before, during, and after a performance or competition:

My coach and I know that my mood affects how we interact. Sometimes I am needy and want her with me the whole time before I compete. Sometimes I need my space and she knows to leave me alone. She has learned when I need her and when she should give me alone time but she is always available if I need her.

Afterwards we find each other and critique my performance.

Athlete-to-athlete communication is also incredibly important on a team. Vara explains his observations when it comes to communication on a team:

Team communication is critical as the team has to perform as an integral unit. A team is not 4,5,8, etc. individual routines being performed at the same time, but rather a choreographed and flowing routine that all teams members contribute to

and are part of. When one section or member is missing then the flow is not fluid or natural. When the sum of the parts work as a whole there is a natural beauty to the team events. (Vance Vara)

Jennifer Marcus explains the importance of this communication, "...however a team feels will show through when they compete. If people are angry at one another, it will show in the performance. It is important to verbalize your feelings so everyone knows how to best approach a situation." Melissa Marcus also says that open team communication is important because if teammates know each other and have open communication they also know how each teammate prepares for competitions or performances. This way the whole team supports each other, and an athlete's teammates should be one's biggest support system.

Good teammate communication is "...talking things out when issues arise" (Melissa Marcus). "Bad communication is waiting until people get upset and an argument erupts" (Melissa Marcus). Both good and bad communication types arise in teams and it is important to know how to handle each. EBD Star Troupe's Sr. Twirl and Dance Twirl team had amazing team chemistry throughout their three years together. They went on to win many state, regional, and national titles in their categories because each of them knew how the others would react to certain situations and they could all help each other through any situation that they were faced with. In practice, when one teammate would start to see another get frustrated with a trick, or frustrated with the coaches, the others would help her talk through her frustration in a way so that no one would get hurt, physically or mentally. The team also knew when talking wasn't necessary. After coming off the competition floor from a very rough routine, all of the

teammates on EBD Star Troupe would know that it was best to leave words unsaid until each member calmed down and everyone was ready to talk. Although at the moment they might have been frustrated, they worked out good team communication to prevent any arguments from erupting (and that shows that the team had good communication skills).

Other teams do struggle with mastering good communication skills. At Synergy's boot camp training throughout the two weeks before the United States Twirling Association's National Baton Twirling Championship Competition, there were many negative emotions and sparks flying that the team had to learn to overcome. A majority of the team stayed and lived together in Miami, Florida throughout the two weeks because many of them were from out of town. They not only had to deal with each other during the eight hour practices each day, but also before and after practice time. Most of the team had good communication, except for the occasional slip up or break down, but one girl on the team caused many arguments to arise because of her poor attitude. As Hogan explains, it only takes one bad attitude to make a practice or competition miserable for the entire team, and this was very evident during practices at Synergy's boot camp. Synergy would meet at ten o'clock every morning to begin practice, and most days by noon, the arguments and friction would start between one athlete and the coach or with fellow teammates. The athlete refused to try to talk things out, but instead used bad communication tactics like gossiping about others, complaining about tricks, and yelling at the coach. Although the team did very well in their competitions, they had a lot of communication issues to work out that often took away from valuable practice time. For instance, one particular day after an intense display of anger the coach had to

take the time to talk to each member of the team individually as well as calling some of the member's parents to help work through the issue, and it resulted in an early release of practice. This was a huge waste of the team's practice time, yet it had to be done to make future practices more successful.

Melissa Deconza, a twirler with the New York Dynamics, explains how her team communicates with each other before, during, and after competition. "Me and my team have a bunch of silly little things like jokes, or chants that we used to do before competing...during (the performance) we talk on the floor and make each other laugh so it is always fun...and after we either tell each other 'good job' or (say) 'what the heck was that' and start laughing." This is common for many baton twirling teams.

Another area of interpersonal communication is competitors communicating with each other. The baton twirling community is very tight-knit, so competitive communication can result in two things: lots of friendships or lots of drama. In a survey conducted about competitor communication in baton twirling, most twirlers responded that it is important to be a good sport and support your competitors. Deconza expounds, "...it's always good to be friends with the people you compete against, so there's always a good vibe with you and you can always congratulate them on their win or loss." Some competitors keep it to being friendly and a good sport with their competitors. Others, however, take it much farther than that. Wilson revealed that one of strongest friendships is with one of her competitors who lives on the opposite side of the country. Wilson met her friend at the 1998 United States Twirling Association's National Championship in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and they thought it would be fun to be pen pals since Wilson lived in California, while her friend lived in Maryland. They wrote each other

throughout that year and couldn't wait to see each other at the next national competition. Since 1998 the girls have been inseparable at all the competitions that both attend, and their friendship has grown into much more than a half-hearted congratulation. Ten years later they are close friends who talk and write on a regular basis.

However, a sport where many athletes get together to compete is bound to have poor competitor communication resulting in drama. Jennifer Marcus explicates that competitors talking about other competitors behind each other's backs or having rude body language towards one another is an example of poor communication. In baton twirling, when one is competing as an individual against all of the others in a specific category, twirlers tend to become very sensitive. When someone feels that they performed better than someone else and that they deserved the better score, "You often hear words like, 'You got cheated out of that one' or 'I don't know what the judge was looking at' and that can make the tension at a competition thick and not as enjoyable" said Sparks.

Nonverbal communication, "...the process of using messages that are not words to generate meaning," is also an extremely important part of sports communication. According to Answers.com, forms of communication, such as smiling and frowning, or patting on the back and blowing on a whistle convey ideas, feelings, and attitudes without using words and are examples of nonverbal communication. "Experimental evidence shows that non-verbal communication can be a very important source of motivation" ("Nonverbal Communication"). Baseball, basketball, and football are three popular American sports in which nonverbal communication is vital to success. In these sports "...if the coach can flash a quick hand signal and instantly the whole teams knows

exactly what they are supposed to do, the chances of executing are much higher” (Toomey). “The key to the signs are to make sure the player knows exactly what he is to do when he sees the sign. This way the coach can directly affect the game and not just let the players have all the say in the outcome” (Toomey). In all three sports coaches relay information onto the playing field without speaking, this is important because the opposing team should not be able to find out the game plan.

A baton team must be able to master nonverbal communication because unlike football and basketball teams where it is acceptable to use your voice to convey verbal messages to your teammates, in baton twirling it is against the rules to use speech as a means of communication during a performance; therefore, one must be able to communicate nonverbally. Twirlers of EBD Star Troupe have had times where this nonverbal communication was absent from their performance and the lack of communication threw off their entire team routine. As two of the four team members were twirling two batons each and getting ready to feed the batons out to their teammates, one missed the fact that her teammate was not in her normal position because of a previous mistake she had made. Usually the twirler would have given a nonverbal gesture to her teammate, but since it was in the middle of a complicated two baton sequence the teammate missed the gesture and ended up tossing the baton to no one on the other side of the gym floor. She was left to run, as gracefully as she could, to the other side of the gym to pick up the baton that she had thrown to no one. This lack of nonverbal communication during the performance resulted in a poor performance by the team.

Synergy of Miami, Florida, provides examples of good nonverbal communication during competition. At the United State's Twirling Association's 2008 National Championship the team was competing in the final round for the National Dance Twirl Team Championship title, the prestigious title that all teams work towards, the team demonstrated good nonverbal communication during their performance. The team had made it to the last thirty seconds of their four minute routine and were preparing for their multiple baton sequence that consisted of two, three, and four baton tricks. Three of the eight girls on the team were responsible for making the sequence successful. Although they had drilled the sequence time and time again it was very difficult to consistently succeed at it. During one of the baton feeds, one of the three members dropped a baton. With poor nonverbal communication the routine could have fallen apart, but since the team had developed good nonverbal communication through body language, they were able to get the correct twirlers the batons that they needed to save the sequence. The team ended up winning the national title.

Although mass communication may not directly affect the performance of athletes, its importance is very evident in the realm of sports. Football, basketball, baseball and other sports are communicated to the mass public through television, radio, magazines, newspapers, and the internet. Mass communication is defined as "...the process of using messages to generate meanings in a mediated system, between a source and a large number of unseen receivers" (Harter 20). According to the University of North Carolina's School of Journalism and Mass Communication website, "Sports in America involve more than \$200 billion in annual spending and touch every professional aspect of media. Our leading sports are followed by 85 percent of the U.S. population,

and the average individual follows five different leagues. Sports affect society in myriad ways, from tourism to retailing to equipment to medicine to media” (“Sports Communication”).

Baton twirling is not as widely followed by the masses as sports such as football, basketball, and baseball, but the mass media does affect the public’s views of twirling. Baton twirling is often looked at as majoretting, or marching in parades. People have the vision of a beauty queen twirling a baton in the talent portion of a beauty pageant. However, if baton twirling was more predominately displayed in the media, people would have a more accurate perception of what baton twirling actually is. When Jonathon Burkin, a twirler in the National Baton Twirling Association, appeared on season three of “America’s Got Talent” he was attempting to show the country how challenging and exciting baton twirling truly is. He did an impressive job at demonstrating the athleticism of baton twirling, but after the show was over said that the producers of the show only wanted him to twirl fire batons only because that was more entertaining, rather than exhibiting traditional twirling skills and showing what a skilled twirler he truly was. Burkin’ participation also demonstrated that males are involved in twirling despite the female stereotype. (United States Twirling Association)

Local media will occasionally aid in the publicity of twirling by featuring pieces on local twirlers or competitions. For instance, on Wednesday, July 30, 2008 after the Unites States Twirling Association’s National Baton Twirling Championship the Damascus and Gaithersburg Gazette ran an article about local twirlers Stephanie and Mitchell Vara. The article focused on their goals for the upcoming International Cup Competition, which they were traveling to Limerick, Ireland to compete in, as well as

their accomplishments at the National Championship in Daytona Beach, Florida which was held the previous week. The article was able to show the public the extent of the twirlers' skills, as well as the worldwide popularity of twirling as a sport. (Singer-Bart)

As the twirlers move in synchronization, performing each movement and technique as perfectly as they can, the athletes of the sport of baton twirling are in communication with themselves, one another, their coaches, and other competitors. Twirlers also use mass media to effectively communicate their sport with the public. They are using intrapersonal communication to mentally prepare themselves for a performance. Twirlers use interpersonal communication to successfully communicate with those around them. Twirlers use nonverbal communication as an important form of interpersonal communication used to convey messages to one another, particularly during a performance or competition.

Communication is important in football, basketball, baseball, and any other individual or team sports. No matter where one looks in the world of sports, communication is vital to the victory of any sport and any athlete. Without good communication skills an athlete or a sport would cease to be successful. Communication is extremely important to the triumph of any sport team or individual athlete. Intrapersonal, interpersonal, nonverbal, and mass communication are all types of communication that athletes use to produce this well deserved and well earned success.

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