

# How Emotions Influence Sport Performance

Interview with Prof. Darko Jekauc, Sport Psychology, HU Berlin

**CB: What is the focus of your research?**

**DJ:** The main focus of my research is on the role of affective processes in sport and exercise. In the last five decades, a great deal of progress has been made in understanding how cognitive processes influence participation in sport. Currently, there are many cognitive models that try to explain why some people are more physically active than others. These models say that you will become physically active if the perceived benefits (e.g. health) are higher than the costs (e.g. time or money) invested. However, human nature means that people do not always act so rationally. In reality, they do not choose the behavioral option with the best cost/benefit ratio. People act rather emotionally. Although it seems obvious that emotions influence our behaviour and actions in every aspect of our life, including sport, it was neglected for a long time in psychological research. Today, we are still living in the "cognitive age in psychology": Cognitive processes play the main role, and emotions are seen as something negative that should be banished in order to act logically. But we cannot make our emotions disappear; they are a part of our life. I think we should learn to manage them accordingly, and this is what we are investigating now: How can we learn to influence our emotions and use them to our advantage in sport?

**CB: Which emotions are important to keep us motivated during sport?**

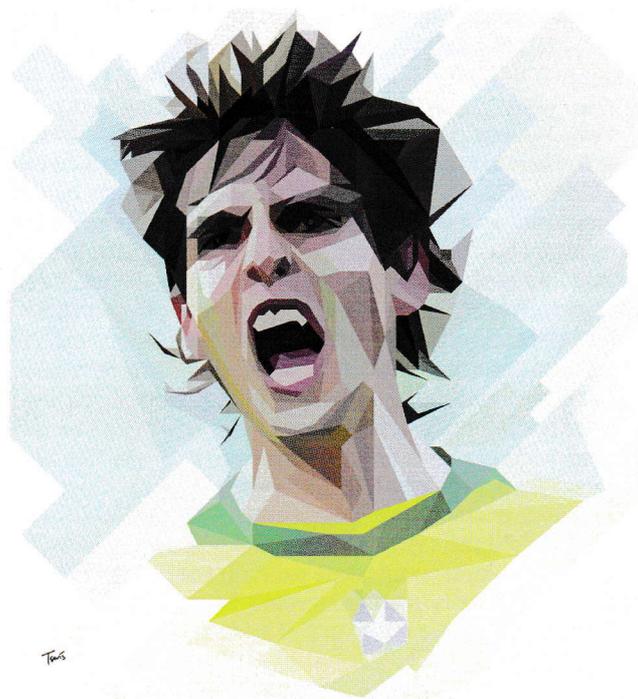
**DJ:** The emotions important for our motivation to exercise depend on the behavioral stage. Negative emotions like dissatisfaction with our body shape or bad health status motivate people to start exercising. They are important in the stage of behaviour acquisition. However, negative emotions are not enough to make people continue practicing a sport for a longer period of time. At some point other emotions override these existing negative ones and people lose their motivation to continue doing sport. For example, stress at work or a family dispute might induce negative emotions which have at that moment higher urgency than dissatisfaction with one's own body. This is the reason why many people drop out

after a few weeks of exercise. Instead, it is important to have positive emotions during exercise like enjoyment in order to maintain physical activity. I think this aspect is important for sports instructors and trainers. They should learn how to induce positive emotions during training in order to keep up the number of participants. For example, in a weekly gymnastics course after five sessions there are only 70% of the participants remaining. After 10 weeks, only 30% participants still come to this course. What happens to all those people that drop out? Why don't they come anymore? This is one question which we try to answer. What roles do emotional factors play for maintenance of physical activity? How can we induce enjoyment during physical activity in order to get people to continue doing sport?

**CB: Are there specific sports that are especially susceptible to the influence of emotions?**

**DJ:** I can't say that there are particular sports in which you have more emotions than others. Regarding the athletes, however, there are huge interindividual differences: Some athletes experience strong emotions, others don't, and others have effective control over their emotions. In competitive sports, we always have experiences of winning and losing. That is why we always have to productively deal with these emotions.

Regarding different types of sports, we always have different kinds of emotion which can emerge. In a football stadium, sometimes you can hear and feel the enthusiasm spreading over the crowd. Spectators sing, shout and applaud to support their own team and therefore the spectators can strongly influence the athletes. In other sports, athletes don't show their emotions al-



Source: Charis Tsevis, Flickr, <http://bit.ly/1qNNNQ1>

though they perceive them because it is not necessary to show them for their type of sport.

**CB: I was very struck by the 7:1 victory of Germany over Brazil in the 2014 soccer world championship. Did the Brazilian team lose because they were emotionally unstable?**

**DJ:** On the one hand, the Brazilian team was playing in its own country and public expectations were very high, so they had to deal with a lot of pressure. I don't know if every player can deal with this kind of pressure. On the other hand, the German team had a lot of self-confidence after reaching the semi-final. After they shot the first goal, they appeared to be in a stage called "the zone". It is like surfing on a wave of positive emotions. They used these positive feelings to further boost their performance. In general, success breeds success by fostering positive emotions which trigger even more success. It is a real skill to handle emotion in such a way that one may perform better in competition. Sometimes, it is favourable to have strong positive emotions to mobilize energy and to improve performance in competition. However, emotions represent a double-edged sword which can easily shift to become negative and turn against you. Handling emotions in a productive way is definitely a competitive advantage.

**CB: How can I, as an athlete, use my emotions as an advantage during a competition?**

**DJ:** First of all, I want to mention that the best strategy for handling emotions depends on the kind of sport you do. For example, in archery, you need a lot more tranquillity and concentration than in American football, where you primarily need a lot of strength. When you are angry in American football, it might improve your performance because you have more power and energy which you can use to push away your opponents. In archery - a sport with high precision- your emotional level should be as low as possible to keep your concentration and to achieve high accuracy. Furthermore, effectively dealing with emotions is highly dependent on the athlete's personality. Therefore, each athlete should find his or her own way to deal with emotions.

**CB: How do you train to use your emotions during competition?**

**DJ:** An effective strategy we are using is mindfulness training. Mindfulness training helps us to focus on the present moment, and to perceive what is going on inside of ourselves. In this way, we can improve our awareness of what is happening in the moment. When I recognize that an emotion is developing inside of me, I can decide whether this emotion is purposeful or not. We can decide how we deal with this emotion. In many cases, when we are not aware of our emotions we get overrun by them. We notice that we are angry or afraid when it is too late, and the damage has already been done. Therefore, we use mindfulness training to learn to recognize our emotional states at an early stage. However, mindfulness is not easy to implement when you have never practised it before. During a competition, we have a lot of thoughts coming into our mind and we tend to get lost in them. When emotions are running high our thoughts tend to speed up and we get distracted from what we are doing. Therefore, we lose control over the situation.

For athletes without experience in mindfulness, one simple exercise to overcome this is to observe your breathing for some time. This seems very simple but it is challenging to maintain concentration. However, mindfulness, like sport, is a skill which can be improved by regular practice.

**FOCUS ON YOUR BREATHING TO REDUCE AROUSAL**

**CB: Is it possible to work with your emotions to achieve better or faster recovery after sport or injury?**

**DJ:** It is well proven that positive thoughts and emotions have a positive effect on recovery. If you imagine a situation where you feel well and healthy, the body has the impulse to achieve this state and start the recovery process. Our emotions and thoughts are closely correlated with one another. Negative emotions trigger negative thoughts, and this creates a vicious circle from which it is difficult to escape from. On the other hand, when we come into the "zone" that I talked about earlier, when you have positive emotions and everything works well, this triggers more positive emotions. Consequently, it can also influence recovery and regeneration.

**CB: Emotions are also used by coaches, either in a "fierce" or "friendly" style. What do you think is the better approach, or does this depend on individual preferences?**

**DJ:** I think this depends on the athlete's personality. As a coach, whatever you say always has greater impact on your athletes if you say it with emotion. In the animal kingdom communication works mainly via emotions; this is actually similar to humans. We receive a lot of information via gestures and body language. It's not only what we say, but also how we say it.

**CB: I've learned that an athlete needs to learn to be master of his or her**

**own emotions, but are there also external factors which influence how an athlete can control and use them ?**

**DJ:** Of course there are external factors which also play an important role: Emotions can spread from spectators to athletes and one athlete can transmit his or her emotions to others. Coaches or significant others can also influence the emotions of athletes. Non-social cues can also play a role. In a quiet environment, for example, you generally have more concentration and lower levels of emotion.

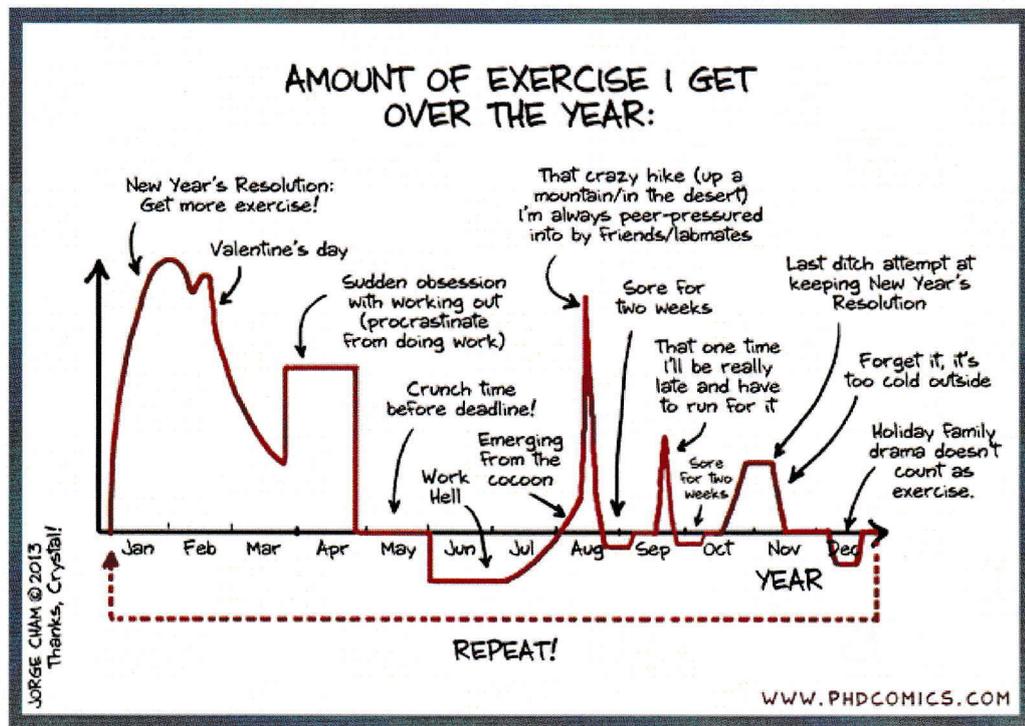
**CB: Do you have some "emergency" advice to control and use your emotions during a competition?**

**DJ:** The simple trick is to just take a deep breath. If you concentrate on your breathing for a moment, your arousal levels and intensity of emotions will be reduced and you may get distracted from the actual problems that you are facing. The process of rumination, or over-thinking, is temporarily stopped. This helps you to see the situation from a different point of view and contemplate different aspects of the competition. Taking a moment to stop and breathe is a very simple exercise, but it works! Plus, it only takes 5 to 10 seconds.

**CB: Thank you for this interview!**

\*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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Source: "Piled Higher and Deeper" by Jorge Cham, www.phdcomics.com