

BY TOMMY NEWTON

IT'S THE BIG GAME. TIME IS RUNNING OUT. YOUR TEAM IS DOWN BY ONE POINT. A FOUL SENDS YOU TO THE FREE THROW LINE. THE GAME IS ON THE LINE. THE MONTHS OF PRACTICE HAVE COME DOWN TO THIS MOMENT. THE OUTCOME IS IN YOUR HANDS — AND IN YOUR HEAD.

YOU'VE GOT TO FOCUS ON THE TASK AT HAND — MAKING THE FREE THROWS. YOU'VE GOT TO STAY POSITIVE. FORGET ABOUT THOSE MISSED SHOTS EARLIER IN THE GAME.

THE SHOT IS UP . . .



Dr. Elizabeth Shoenfelt

For the past two decades, Dr. Elizabeth Shoenfelt has been helping athletes improve their performances by improving their mental skills. The Western Kentucky University psychology professor directs the school's graduate program in industrial/organizational psychology, but much of the applied research conducted by her and her students has come in the area of sport psychology.

Both areas share common themes of motivation, leadership, group dynamics, teamwork, goal setting, and training, she said.

"When I was in graduate school at Louisiana State University, I started working with the women's basketball team," Shoenfelt said. She began looking at the use of imagery and rehearsal techniques in improving free throw shooting.

Shoenfelt came to Western in 1983 and began working with Coach Paul Sanderford's Lady Topper teams. She expanded on her work at LSU and began using behavior modeling and goal setting in her work with the Lady Toppers.

"Essentially what we found, and this was in the mid-80s, was that imagery was very effective in improving performance," she said. Positive imagery focusing on proper performance and positive mindset helped the players improve their free throw shooting.

"She's very good at what she does," said Coach Sanderford, who worked with Shoenfelt during his tenure at Western and at the University of Nebraska. "The industrial/organizational psychology program at Western is one of the best in the country and Betsy has worked very hard in sport psychology."

Goal setting has become a well-established motivational technique in sport and industrial/organizational psychology.

"Most coaches who've been around a while may not call it sport psychology, but they know an awful lot of sport psychology," Shoenfelt said. "They may not know the terminology but they know how to use it."

Public awareness, however, is another matter. "Most people don't understand the term psychology," she said of a field that includes dozens of disciplines. "They think of clinical psychology and picture the old Bob Newhart TV show or now Frasier Crane. There has been a stigma attached to the word psychology."

But public awareness is improving as golfers, Olympic athletes, and professional teams use sport psychologists to enhance performance, she said.

Most of the research studies conducted by Shoenfelt and her students are published in psychology journals such as *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* and *Perceptual and Motor Skills*. But in 2001 she joined Sanderford to co-author a book, *Women's Basketball: Inside the Practice Court*.

In her previous work with Coach Sanderford, Shoenfelt also developed a technique to assist coaches and players in clarifying and communicating each player's role on a team. Using a list of 16 roles, each player and coach independently select the primary role for each player, such as scorer, rebounder, assist leader, defensive stopper, or shooter. Results are tallied, then presented individually to each player and the coach. The procedure is followed three times during the season. Rates of role agreement between player and coach typically show significant improvement through the season.

"It was a great communication tool for me over the years," Sanderford



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said. "The big thing was the fact that the student-athletes saw the need for what we were doing and saw the value in that. That's very satisfying."

The role clarification process looks at four areas: role understanding, role acceptance, role commitment, and role satisfaction. Following the roles process, most players understand and accept their role and are committed to it, but satisfaction can become a problem when playing time is involved, Shoenfelt said.

"Toward the end of the season some of the players aren't satisfied, but that's not a bad thing," she said. "If you've got a player sitting on the bench and he or she is completely satisfied, then you've got a problem."

Shoenfelt has used the process at Western, Nebraska, and East Carolina. This year she has modified the process for Western's volleyball team. "It seems to be a very effective technique, a structured communication process that allows a coach to communicate to players what he or she wants them to do on the court."

Sanderford agreed that more coaches are realizing the importance of mental focus and role acceptance. Their book, aimed at players and coaches, includes practice drills along with a chapter on mental techniques.

The main themes covered in that chapter are the following:

- * Goal setting. Effective goals must be specific and difficult. Players must be aware of the goals, must understand them, and must be committed to achieving them.

- * Focus and confidence. In a competitive situation, an athlete must focus on the present, the positive, and the performance.

- * Practice. Repetition is the best way for athletes to learn a skill. The more a skill is practiced, the more it becomes automatic.

Those three themes also have been used in several studies Shoenfelt and her students have conducted on free throw shooting.

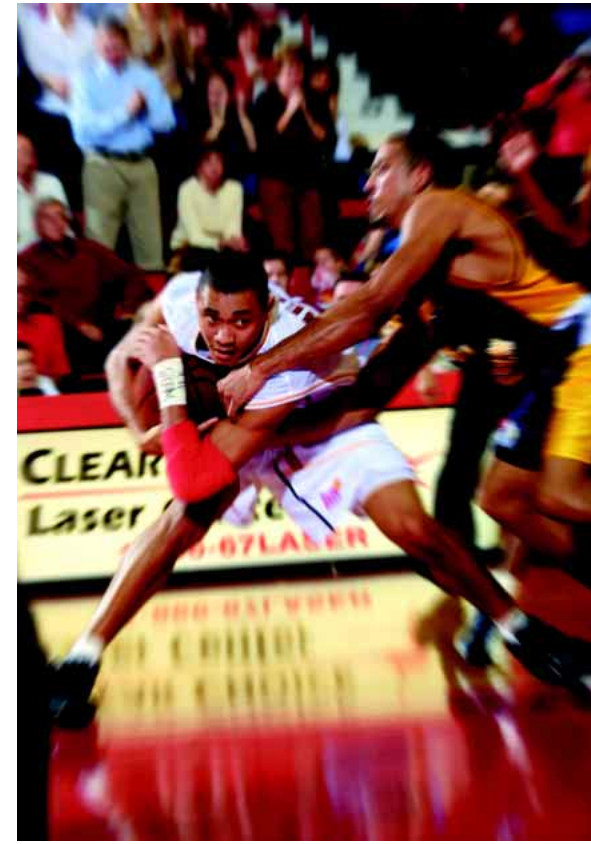


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In a study published in 1991, Shoenfelt investigated a coach's concern that players' free throw shooting was being negatively affected by a weight training program. On alternating days over an eight-week period, 14 members of the Lady Topper team engaged in weight training and aerobic exercise. Immediately following the conditioning, the players shot two sets of 10 free throws. Analysis showed no significant difference in accuracy.

In a study published in 2002, Shoenfelt and four graduate students compared constant and variable practice conditions on free throw shooting. They were trying to find out whether variable practice conditions would improve performance for a consistently performed task, or if constant practice is the only effective practice for a consistently performed task. The study used 94 students assigned to practice free throws by following one of four practice routines over a five-week period. Constant practice was from the free throw line while the other three conditions varied around the top of the free throw line. The routines resulted in different levels of performance during practice. However on test days, when all players shot from the free throw line, students who'd practiced in variable conditions performed as well as those who'd practiced under constant conditions.

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Previous research has shown that in the business world or the classroom those performing standard tasks or procedures can benefit from varied training. Participants learn to generalize so that they can perform regardless of the conditions. Shoenfelt used the example of a student sitting at the same computer all semester who is disconcerted when that computer doesn't work on exam day or someone else takes that seat. If a student uses different computers throughout the semester, he or she won't be upset by a change later.

"I would recommend variable practice at this point," she said. In some situations, conditions (such as variable practice) that impair performance during training actually improve performance in the transfer setting.

In 2002, four of Shoenfelt's graduate students studied team disciplinary decisions by looking at the severity of rule violations, the severity of punishment, and the decision-making processes used. The students found that athletes (as well as corporate employees) are concerned with fairness in reward or punishment, especially when the "star" athlete is involved.

"What the athletes said was that consistent punishment is important. It is seen as more fair and as a greater deterrent to future misconduct," Shoenfelt said. "If you let one athlete get away with something, it sends a message to the other players." It is also important that the severity of the punishment matches the severity of the violation. Lenient punishment does not deter future rule violations when a severe infraction has occurred.

Now back to the game . . .

The shot is good. Tie game.

The next shot is up. Goooooood!!!! Your team is the champion.

The bench erupts in celebration. The crowd goes wild. Somewhere a sport psychologist is smiling.