

SPORT PSYCHOLOGIST, COACH AND ATHLETE MAKE A WINNING TEAM

Preparing mentally and physically for skating competition go hand-in-hand

CLEVELAND, OH – December 16, 2008 – For United States figure skater Parker Pennington, excelling on the ice means mastering skills that don't require lacing up his skates, but rather, training his mind.

An accomplished nationally ranked skater, Pennington welcomes his weekly sessions with sport psychologist Jack J. Lesyk, Ph.D., of Beachwood, Ohio, as he trains for the upcoming U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Cleveland next month. "Jack has helped me see things in different ways that I never thought of," Pennington explains. "He has helped open my eyes to what I am capable of accomplishing and has put me in the best position to achieve all of my goals."

Pennington wanted to utilize every opportunity available to reach his dreams of national success on the ice, so when he discovered other top athletes were working with sport psychologists, he decided to give it a try himself.

"The best athletes in any sport don't become the best because they are the best physical specimens," Pennington said. "They are the best because they are the most prepared, both physically and mentally."

Dr. Lesyk, a certified consultant with the Association for Applied Sport Psychology and the Director of the Ohio Center for Sport Psychology, is known for his work with figure skaters, as well as other athletes. He has conducted group seminars for skaters and coaches, as well as worked one-on-one with skaters to assist in developing mental imagery, relaxation and concentration skills.

According to Dr. Lesyk, the difference between a good skater and a great skater can lie in their ability to master mental techniques. "Figure skating is very mentally demanding and the judges critique every element of the performance to the tips of the skater's toes," Dr. Lesyk said. "Perfectionism, stress and performing alone on the ice are all factors that can negatively impact a skater's performance."

A Winning Combination

Pennington's skating coach, former Olympic Gold Medalist Carol Heiss Jenkins, values the help that her skaters receive from sport psychologists and it is an asset that gives them that extra "edge."

"People don't realize how difficult this sport is," Heiss Jenkins said. "There is nothing wrong with having someone help you. I have no qualms about it whatsoever. I think it is just a piece of the puzzle and a part of team."

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Heiss Jenkins said skaters need to develop the necessary skills to improve in their sport and to realize that it takes time to achieve their goals. Too often, she said, the young skaters she coaches are stuck in what she calls the “McDonald’s” mindset. “They want everything right away and life isn’t like that,” she said. “They [kids] go up to a drive thru and want to order an Olympic Gold Medal.”

Heiss Jenkins, who said choking during competition is one of the most common problems she sees among skaters, believes sport psychologists can help athletes examine their difficulties and learn how to find the answers for themselves, without creating a dependency on outside help.

For Pennington, the use of a sport psychologist has been life-changing. He is even considering a career one day in sport psychology. “I would love one day to be able to help others reach their dreams and give them guidance on how to get there,” he explained. “It is up to the individual to do it, but I would like to open their minds to things they may have overlooked and help them believe in their gifts.”

The Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) promotes the ethical practice, science and advocacy of sport and exercise psychology. Founded in 1986, AASP is an international, multidisciplinary, professional organization that offers certification to qualified professionals who practice sport and exercise psychology. With more than 1,200 members in 28 countries, AASP is a worldwide leader, sharing research and resources with the public via its Web site, www.appliedsportpsych.org.

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