Psychological support in long-term preparation of athletes

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Summary
The paper deals with the peculiarities and the tasks of psychological support for athletes in process of long-term perfection. Specificity and differences in psychological function manifestation (thinking, feelings, intuition, and sensations) at different stages of the long-term preparation as an indicator of athletes’ psychological state have been studied. Psychological factors, influencing the process of the long-term perfection of athletes, have been analysed with account for the dynamics of rational and irrational psychological functions. Psychological support tasks at each stage of the long-term preparation have been formulated on the basis of expert survey results reflecting the level of psychological function development in athletes. Psychological support tasks being actual at all stages of the long-term preparation of athletes have been singled out as well. The features of psychological support for the athletes at the stage of withdrawal from elite sport, being the least studied in sports psychology, have been considered separately. The system of knowledge about psychological support for the long-term preparation of athletes including four major blocks of its realization has been formed: psychological preparation, organizational and methodical aspects, psychological components of providing the efficiency of athletic preparation, and the directions of psychological support in the process of selection and orientation of athletes’ preparation.

Keywords: psychological support, long-term preparation stages, psychological functions.

Introduction
Rapid development of current sport achievements and, thus, the search for the new ways of enhancement of the competitive activity efficiency draw attention of athletes, coaches, and scientists to psychological constituent of preparation process that should be intimately associated with the stages of the long-term perfection.

While considering the process of the long-term perfection that includes two stages – bringing the athlete into a peak of his capacities and their realization – from the perspective of psychological support, one should draw a parallel between the tasks of psychological support at each stage and the respective recommendations, contributing to translation of these tasks into sports practice with account for the dynamics of indices of athlete psychological functions at different stages of the long-term preparation. This approach will permit in-depth study of psychological support peculiarities in the system of the long-term preparation of athletes, thus, allowing to form its general structure and to develop the algorithm of its realization.

The problem of psychological support for the long-term preparation of athletes has been studied by many well-known specialists (Horn, 2008; Горская, 2008; Brewer, 2009; Высочина, Безмылов, 2015; Платонов, 2015). Some authors have considered the issues of psychological preparation as the constituent of psychological support (Hardy, Jones, Gould, 1996; Williams et al., 2004; Tenenbaum, Eklund, 2007; Алексеев, 2006; Родионов, Сопов, Непопалов, 2010; Смирнова, 2009) and individualization of athletes’ preparation at different stages of the long-term preparation (Platonov, Bulatova, 2001; Буштрук et al., 2002; MacNamara et al., 2010). In foreign literature, most of the focus is concentrated on individual practical aspects of psychological preparation (Vallerand, Rousseau, 2001; Adie et al., 2008; Sarkar, Fletcher, 2013; Afremow, 2015) whereas the theoretical constituent and the conceptual provisions of athletes’ psychological support have been studied insufficiently.

The lack of consensus with regard to the problem of psychological support in the system of the long-term preparation of athletes and systematization
of scientific knowledge on this issue causes the relevance and timeliness of studying this subject.

**Objective of study** was to form the system of knowledge on psychological support of the long-term preparation of athletes and to determine the tasks and the methods of its practical realization.

**Methods and organization of the study**

Analysis and generalization of data of scientific and methodical literature and internet, expert survey, and structural-functional analysis were employed for the study. Twelve highly skilled experts participated in the study (the best specialists of Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus). Six of them were specialists in the field of sport science (doctors of science with extensive experience of research) and the other six were the former highly skilled athletes (masters of sport, winners of world championships, Europe and other major competition).

**Results and discussion**

Classification based on four psychological functions – thinking, feeling, intuition, and sensations – was used as a basis for conducting expert survey of specialists that permitted in-depth study of athletes’ psychological functions (Jung, 2003).

The level of psychological functions development in athletes at different stages of the long-term preparation was assessed by experts according to ten-point system (Fig.1). Most of them noted more difficult assessment of irrational psychological functions (intuition and sensations) as they were not always associated with athlete age and its corresponding preparation stage but represented the complex situational individual characteristics. The issue of age peculiarities of athletes at different stages of preparation was also controversial as they differed in different sports events (the stage of maximal realization of individual capacities in rhythmic gymnastics occurs at the age of 16-18 while in team sports – at the age of 23-30). In this regard, during analysis of psychological functions, we focused our attention on psychological constituent of athlete personality and the degree of its significance at each stage of the long-term preparation.

In order to understand the essence of studied psychological functions, one should consider their content-related aspect from the angle of sports practice.

**Thinking** – mental cognitive process that allows to set conceptual logical relationships between cognoscible and phenomena. It is based on logical and objective criteria that allow the athlete to process information with a certain level of productivity.

**Feelings** – emotional process, which reflects subjective evaluative attitude of athlete towards real or abstract objects. Taking into account the fact that sports activity is accompanied with significant intensity of emotions before, during, and after the major competitions, this psychological function requires thorough study within a context of the long-term sports perfection.

![Fig. 1. Dynamics of psychological function development in the process of the long-term sports perfection (points)](image)

**Note.** Preparation stages: I – initial; II – preliminary basic; III – specialized basic; IV – preparation for the highest achievements; V – maximal realization of individual capacities; VI – perfect mastery maintenance; VII – gradual decrease of achievements; VIII – withdrawal from elite sport.
**Intuition** is associated with anticipative capacities of athlete, his unconscious perception of goings-on, and instinctive reactions.

The fourth psychological function—**sensations**—is based on athlete’s body responses to physical stimuli. It is one of the most important constituents in sport as it provides the basis for formation of specialized types of perception. It is common knowledge that well developed kinaesthetic perception (sense of water, snow, equipment, etc.) represents the part of psychological profile of successful athlete. In contact sports events, sensations give rise to the gamut of the emotions and physiological responses, contributing to exacerbation of instincts. It is especially manifested in the view of high degree of traumatism in sports activity.

Availability of all four psychological functions in athlete allows integral and harmonious perception of the situation. It should be stressed that these functions tend to develop to different extents and have different dynamics. As a rule, one function is dominant over the others providing the athlete with real means in the form of mental activity advantages to achieve the success.

While evaluating the indices of psychological functions, one should take into consideration the fact that, depending on individual personality characteristics, some athletes better use logical information (reasoning, discourse, evidences) while the others – emotional one (attitude of people, their feelings). Some athletes have more developed intuition (inkling, perception on the whole, instinctive grasp of information) while the others – more developed sensations (perception of external and internal irritants).

Analysis of psychological functions includes comparison of rational and irrational functions. Thinking and feeling belong to the former as they permit to make judgments about gained experience of athlete. Athlete with dominant “thinking” function assesses these or those things using logics and arguments. His personality is focused on making rational judgments. If feeling represents the leading function, then the athlete’s attention is concentrated on emotional aspect of life experience and his assessment is realized in the form of positive or negative emotions expressed in categories “bad or good”, “pleasant or unpleasant”, “interesting or boring”.

According to the experts, in our study a clear cut tendency to synchronous development of the functions of thinking, intuition and sensations was revealed. Unlike them, athletes’ feelings were well developed already at the very first stages of the long-term preparation. This function is a little subjected to fluctuations under the impact of preparation stage or age changes, although feelings play an important role during the career of an athlete.

Sensations and intuition belong to irrational psychological functions. Through them, athlete’s mentality passively registers events in the external (sensation) or internal (intuition) world without assessing and explaining them. Sensation represents a direct, non-judgmental, and realistic perception of the external world (Юнг, 2008). The most peculiar feature of intuition is an unconscious perception of the current experience.

The results of expert estimation indicate that the development of irrational psychological functions occurs similarly in the process of the long-term perfection. They achieve their peak at the stage of perfect mastery maintenance and begin to decrease slightly after that.

On the basis of this approach to determining the peculiarities of psychological support for athletes at different stages of the long-term preparation, one may trace the changes of athletes’ psychological functions in the dynamics as an indicator of their psychological state, and define psychological support tasks on this grounds (Table 1, 2).

Table 1 and Table 2 are based on the material presented in works of V. N. Platonov (2001, 2015).

Gradual development of psychological functions of thinking, intuition, and sensations is noted at the first phase of the long-term preparation process. The balance between rational psychological functions (thinking and feeling) occurs at the fourth stage – preparation for the highest achievements. From the angle of sports psychology, it is an important transitional stage before drastic shift of priorities in the life of an athlete.

While at the first three stages the emotional perception and responsiveness to situation, bright and disruptive reactions prevail in the majority of athletes, then, beginning from the fifth stage – maximal realization of individual capacities – conscious and rational attitude towards performed work, concrete vision of the goal, usage of the advantages of sensory systems in the form of sensations, developed intuition in the form of anticipative capacities, come to the fore.
It is noteworthy that thinking prevails over other functions, slightly exceeding intuition at the stage of perfect mastery maintenance as compared to the stage of initial preparation, when it falls behind the other functions in the level of development. It is interesting to note that the development of psychological functions culminates at the sixth stage – perfect mastery maintenance – rather than at the stage of maximal realization of individual capacities. It is just the period, when the athlete emotional reaction to the ongoing events decreases. This is related to the recognition of own success and increased self-evaluation, a sense of inner well-being and decreased anxiety, accumulated experience of the competitive activity and development of the ability to predict the results, high level of self-control and self-regulation (especially in highly skilled athletes).

In the view of foregoing, it is safe to conclude that among psychological factors, influencing the process of the long-term preparation of athletes and indirectly reflecting the development of psychological functions, the most significant ones are: conscious attitude to work, vision of the goal, assertion, ability to discipline and self-control, anticipative abilities, knowledge of one’s strong points, and understanding one’s psychological advantage over an opponent.

Special attention should be paid to the issue of psychological support for the athlete at the stage of withdrawal from elite sport as it has been hardly highlighted in scientific literature. During this period, when psychological functions tend to decrease that is frequently accompanied with anxiety, confusion, and nothingness, he has to think through the occurring changes calmly and carefully. As far as withdrawal from sport is associated with cardinal change of life style, regimen, social circle, objectives, interests, etc., it is extremely important to create conditions allowing the athlete to maintain the feeling of his social significance and relevance. This is a guarantee of his successful social adaptation.

Professional sports career, depending on sport event specifics, has its time restrictions. Despite

### Table 1

**Psychological support tasks and practical recommendations at the first stage of long-term perfection process**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>№</th>
<th>Long-term preparation stage</th>
<th>Psychological support tasks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Initial preparation</td>
<td>Cognitive activity stimulation (thinking and sensations), display of initiative and individual psychological features contributing to further sports perfection.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Development of psychomotorics and psycho-emotional skills of perception and reaction on the basis of gamelike method as the foundation of general motor culture.</td>
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<td>Encouragement and moral support of young athlete as a motivation factor to sports engagement.</td>
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<td>Development of drive to motor activity on the competitive basis in children.</td>
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<td>II</td>
<td>Preliminary basic preparation</td>
<td>Development and maintenance of strong interest in sports practice in athletes and development of drive to purposeful, long-term sports perfection.</td>
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<td>Development of conscious need to compete in athlete and formation of psychological mechanism to compare personal sport results with those of other athletes.</td>
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<td>Determination of the level of motivation to further preparation.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Development and stimulation of psychological attributes and qualities necessary for success in selected sport event.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Assessment of psychological peculiarities of young athletes for specialization (selection of position, discipline, etc.) and selection of the most talented ones on the basis of genetically determined factors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Specialized basic preparation</td>
<td>Development of the ability to set competitive goal and algorithm of its realization.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Development of self-control (operative, current, and stage-by-stage) skills for correction and optimization of mental and physiological state.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Training of an athlete to do self-analysis of performances and correction of errors through meaningful attitude and rational approach.</td>
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<td>Strengthening motivation to sports activities.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching of skills to manage emotional states, especially those before the start of competitions.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Development of mental adaptation as a factor of the ability to cope with stress and nervous system endurance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Preparation for the highest achievements</td>
<td>Increase of the volume of psychological preparation and elaboration of individual program of psychological impact.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Elaboration of psychological preparation strategy with focusing on strong points of athlete mentality.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Development of capacity for self-regulation under psychologically complex competitive conditions (conscious control of feelings, thoughts, and sensations).</td>
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the recently increased period of perfect mastery maintenance in many sports events, withdrawal from sport represents a serious stress for an athlete, who puts so much of himself into his work. Therefore, state program of all-round support including psychological aspects should be developed and realized properly that will allow an athlete to remain whole and successful personality, while preserving respect and reasonable attitude towards himself and his merits after termination of sports career. In this regard, special retraining courses (already functioning in some cities of Ukraine) and free of charge places in higher educational institutions should be created within the frame of state program in order athletes could train for a new occupation or expand their array of features. Besides, athletes need support in the form of legal and financial counselling as most of them are not adjusted to decide questions of material character due to the long-term extremely specialized activity. Moreover, athlete withdrawing from sport cannot stop practicing sport abruptly. Transition to a new way of life represents a gradual process of physical load decrease. Therefore, in order to maintain psychological and physical balance, athlete needs comfortable conditions and opportunity to train in familiar environment that will contribute to painless withdrawal from sport.

Aiming to maintain positive emotional state after termination of sports career, it is expedient to provide an athlete with psychological support in the form of regular sessions with specialist, which are oriented to the development of motivation of personality development under new conditions, maintenance of adequate level of self-esteem, development of strategy for finding new areas of application of one’s forces, improvement of mental adaptation to altered life conditions, optimization of social contacts, etc.

It should be noted that the following tasks would be pressing at all stages of the long-term sport perfection:

1. Analysis of psychological factors and diagnostics of athlete’s state.
2. Correction of unfavourable mental states: in training process (mobilizing emotional-volitional sphere to perform complex tasks, coping with stress due to errors, using mental defences – sublimation, rationalization, etc.); pre-start ones («apathy», «fever», etc.); in the course of competitions; recovery after poor performances (both the athlete and the coach should be subjected to mental rehabilitation).
3. Development of inner psychological potential (volitional powers, intelligence, awareness, understanding of one’s strong and weak points).

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<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Maximal realization of individual capacities</td>
<td>Identification of the body hidden reserves in the field of psychological fitness and assistance in their realization in training and competitive activity (sensations, intuition). Study of weak and strong points of the main opponents and teammates (in sports games). Correction of athlete psychological state before and after competitions (feelings). Maximal mobilization of athlete’s mentality – voluntary management of the state of optimum competition readiness using the experience of psychological preparation at previous stages.</td>
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<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>Perfect mastery maintenance</td>
<td>Maximal usage of own mental resources as a factor of maintaining the high level of performance. Creation of stable social well-being (education, new directions of self-realization, family) for confidence in future career and personal growth. Search for reserves of motivation for further performances and improvement of one’s capacities. Creation and maintenance of favourable psychological climate in relations as the condition for keeping up stable results.</td>
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<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>Gradual decrease of achievements</td>
<td>Development of psychological resistance to violent competition that intensified at this stage and worries about lost opportunities. Search for new psychological resources, maintaining self-esteem and general positive mind-set of athlete (comfortable living conditions, material well-being, communication with relatives, etc.). Usage of innovative preparation technologies, modern equipment, training simulators, contributing to creation of favourable psychological state.</td>
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</table>
4. Development and maintenance of motivation to success achievement with account for the fact that the structure of motives may be supplemented and transformed at different stages of the long-term preparation.

5. Development and self-improvement of communication skills in athletes as one of the most important components of goal-setting algorithm.

6. Usage of autogenic training for achievement or optimization of required current state and goals.

7. Development and implementation of the programs of psychological support for athletes on the basis of individual approach.

Conducted study with application of differentiated approach to solution of the tasks of psychological support at different stages of the long-term preparation resulted in formation of the system of knowledge about psychological support for the long-term preparation of athletes including four major blocks of its realization (Fig. 2). The main among them is psychological preparation of athletes that has applied character and is subdivided into psychodiagnostics, psychocorrection, and psychoprophylaxis in the process of which psychological profile of athlete is modelled and individual, generalized, and group models are created. Correct organization of psychological preparation necessitates determination of the key goals, tasks, and methods. Psychodiagnostics that represents estimation of athlete’s mental state and qualities is conducted by means of psychological testing using the interview method (conversation, interview, questionnaire, etc.), examination of psychophysiological indices on the basis of instrumental methods, application of projective methods of psychodiagnostics: graphical, visual, etc. Psychocorrection and psychoprophylaxis begin with selection of means and methods of preparation that include: sport coaching, mind-set training, counselling, psychological rehabilitation, etc. Psychocorrectional measures are followed by psychological control (repeated carrying out psychodiagnostical procedures).

Besides psychological preparation of athletes, the methodology of psychological support realization includes organizational and methodical aspects, psychological components of sports preparation efficiency provision and directions of psychological support in the process of selection and orientation of athletes’ preparation.

Organizational and methodical aspects of psychological support for athletes reflect the form of psychological support introduction into preparation process (within Complex Scientific Group, etc.), planning of psychological support for preparation with account for the goals and the tasks at the stages of the long-term perfection, association between psychological support and the content, and the tasks of different structural units of training process (4-year, annual cycle, etc.).

Psychological components of sports preparation efficiency provision include psychological factors providing successful training process at the stages of the long-term preparation, psychological determinants of successful competitive activity in sports event, psychosocial adaptation of an athlete at different stages of the long-term perfection, etc.

The main directions of psychological support in the process of selection and orientation of athletes’ preparation are: selection of athletes at different stages of the long-term perfection with account for mental fitness, sports preparation orientation with account for psychological attributes and qualities of personality (direction of profound specialization), selection of individual activity style under conditions of competitive activity, etc. Considered structural elements of the system of knowledge on psychological provision for the long-term preparation of athletes allow to map up the landmarks for the further in-depth studies of the given problem.

Conclusions

The system of knowledge on psychological support for the long-term preparation of athletes and its main constituents – psychological support for athletes, organizational and methodical aspects, psychological components of sports preparation efficiency provision and the directions of psychological support in the process of selection and orientation of athletes’ preparation – has been developed. The tasks of psychological support for athletes at different stages of the long-term preparation have been formulated with account for psychological functions of athletes and is linked with the methods of system of knowledge realization and brought to consistent managing cycle.
Fig. 2. System of knowledge on psychological support for the long-term preparation of athletes and methods of its practical realization
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PSIKHOLOGINĖ PARAMA SPORTININKAMS DAUGIAMEČIO RENGINIOProCesе

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SANTRAUKA

Straipsnyje nagrinėjami psichologinės paramos sportininkams ypataių uždaviniai daugiamečio rengimo procese. Kaip sportininkų psichologinės būklės indikatoriai išsiriti psichologinių funkcijų (mąstymo, jausmų, intuicijos, pojūčių) savitumai ir skirtumai įvairiais daugiamečio rengimo etapais. Išanalizuoti psichologinių funkcijų veiksniai veikimą, organizacinius metodinius ypatumus, psichologinės paramos uždaviniai atskirų sportininkų rengimo procese. Atskirai aptarti psichologinės paramos uždavinius sportininkams, baigiantys savo sportinę karjerą. Šie klausimai dar nėra pakankamai išnagrinėti. Sudaryta žinių apie psichologinės paramos svarbą daugiamečio sportininkų rengimo procese. Jame apibrėžtas ir stebėtina daugiamečio sportininkų rengimo procese, psichologinės paramos efektyvumo ir psichologinės paramos taikymą atrankos procese. 

Raktažodžiai: psichologinė parama, daugiamečio rengimo etapi, psichologinės funkcijos.