

THE PARADOXICAL NATURE OF THE HAMMER THROW

By Greg Gassner

A former national-class hammer thrower has written a piece which applies to almost all events. When an error becomes so repetitive as to create a growing problem, the coach searches for a way to enable the athlete to succeed. If we follow standard "fault-correction" charts, we would never have come up with something so simple, and . . . paradoxical. Gassner studies in Philadelphia and coaches throwers at the University of Pennsylvania.

The hammer throw is perhaps the most misunderstood and one of the most difficult events to learn in track and field. It is in itself an enigma or paradox to even experienced coaches and athletes.

I have long felt that two very important technical aspects of the hammer throw, namely relaxed extension of the arms to create maximum effective radius, and the notion of countering the hammer by sitting back against the ball, are quite paradoxical in nature. Think of the absurdity of trying to maintain a relatively relaxed, passive upper body with arms fully extended while driving furiously with your lower body and moving the hammer at speeds of up to 60 miles per hour.

Likewise, to counter the weight of the hammer by sitting back (driving, fall backward with your back, head, buttocks and displacing your mass against the hammer) as the hammer head moves from 180 degrees to zero degrees—which is a linear component of a mainly rotational event.

It is at this point when the athlete should be sitting back against the ball that he has a tremendous urge to race ahead of the hammer into the next turn (known as dragging), thus slowing down the hammer's speed and decreasing effective radius. When sitting back against the hammer is successfully applied, it has the effect of dramatically increasing the speed of the hammer and gives the athlete a tremendous sense of control, albeit paradoxically, by falling, sitting back against the hammer.

TRY SOMETHING DIFFERENT: COACH PARADOXICALLY

How do you effectively teach these two difficult-to-learn concepts that are required for successful hammer throwing? The usual method, of course, is through drills,

hard work, and years of throwing, etc. But if coaches are tired of banging their heads against the wall and frustration levels are high in trying to get your athletes to learn these motor skills, then why not try a novel approach?

The hammer throw, as described here, is paradoxical in nature. Why not use a paradoxical intervention to teach these concepts? Paradoxical intervention is a concept borrowed from family therapists who for years have used this technique successfully to dislodge individuals and families who are stuck in certain maladaptive, repetitive patterns of behavior, not unlike slumping athletes (Debord, 1989). The basic premise of paradoxical interventions is to "prescribe the symptom"; that is, ask the athlete to do just what he has been so consciously trying to avoid! (Bar-Eli, 1991).

Paradoxical interventions harness the athlete's resistance by using it to the coach's advantage. For instance, if an athlete is resisting your attempts to get him to extend his arms, then anticipate his resistance by telling him to do the opposite, that is to bend his arms. To successfully resist the coach, the athlete now has to straighten his arms. This technique works remarkably well with athletes who are stubbornly resistant to the instructions offered, and moves the coach away from taking an unproductive, authoritarian approach.

Another important component of the paradoxical intervention is "reframing." Reframing is the explanation given by the coach as to why the athlete is carrying out the paradoxical intervention, which has the effect of changing the emotional setting or viewpoint. Reframing places the problem in a positive perspective and this helps the athlete to change more readily. The athlete can then recognize the possibility of controlling events instead of being controlled by them (Debard, 1989).

EXAMPLE IN THE SPORT SETTING

Let's look at an example of these concepts in a training situation. After several weeks of unsuccessfully coaching a first year hammer thrower regarding the extension of his arms in the typical coaching method, I perceived the athlete still pulling his arms in, which resulted in a considerable decrement in throwing distance. The athlete was becoming increasingly hostile towards this issue.

Since his resistance was hardening and logical coaching was ineffective, the athlete was given a paradoxical assignment of pulling in his arms as far as possible on the next three throws. He was given the reframed explanation that it was obvious that he needed to feel in control by pulling in his arms and that if he really wanted to feel fully in control that he should pull his arms in all the way.

Upon completion of three throws, the athlete appeared startled by the considerable decrease in throwing distance. For the remainder of the practice the athlete consistently extended his arms and since then has only had relatively minor problems regarding this issue.

This intervention had the effect of allowing the athlete to fully experience his mistakes, which is sometimes necessary before you can improve.

ALWAYS USE CAUTION

Caution is advised when using paradoxical coaching methods; they should only be used as a last resort when logical means fail (Bar-Eli, 1991). Additionally, paradoxical coaching should be individually tailored and well-timed for it to be effective. The coach using

these techniques should have the best interest of the athlete in the forefront and no attempt to deceive the athlete should ever be attempted.

A good policy before attempting a paradoxical intervention is to tell the athlete what you are attempting to accomplish and to receive his consent. Informing the athlete of your intentions should not lessen the impact and can actually increase rapport. In explaining a paradoxical intervention to the athlete, it may be helpful to include the reasoning as stated previously: "Sometimes it is necessary for athletes to fully experience their mistakes before they can improve."

CONCLUSION

Paradoxical interventions offer coaches new flexibility in dealing with athletes that may prove beneficial to both parties. Well-timed and individually tailored interventions can have the effect of helping the athlete turn a frustrating situation into a humorous one (Bar-Eli, 1991).

Humor is often a side effect of a good paradoxical intervention as it helps to create a distancing effect from the problem situation. This serves to relax the athlete, which is usually a significant part of the problem. Paradoxical coaching can be applied to any event in track and field where athletes are mired in making repetitive technical mistakes and not able to correct them with the usual methods.

REFERENCES

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