Title Here: What Are Athletes Saying to Themselves? Self-talk and Motivation in Youth Tennis

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ABSTRACT (Approx. 500 words; also may submit manuscript if the paper is complete)

Athletes talk to themselves for instruction and motivation in the heat of sport (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2011). Prior work shows that self-talk is related to an athlete’s personal motivation for sport and perception of the coach climate (Zourbanos et al., 2015). However, many researchers focus on the self-talk reported by athletes rather than self-talk observed as athletes engage in sport (Winsler, 2009). Among many sports, youth tennis is a fruitful area for observing what athletes say to themselves (Van Raalte et al., 1994, 2000). The gaps in literature created the need for the author’s dissertation. From this project, the current study examined what youth tennis athletes say to themselves, and the relation of self-talk to tennis performance and motivation.

Twenty-eight tennis players (ages 9 to 17 years) were recruited to study in practice and match-play scenarios. They reported the frequency of self-talk on the Self-Talk Use Questionnaire (STUQ; Hardy et al., 2001) and the use of predetermined self-talk phrases on the Automatic Self-Talk Questionnaire for Sport (ASTQS: Zourbanos et al., 2009). They were observed in matches with the Self-Talk and Gestures Rating Scale (STAGRS; Van Raalte et al., 1994) and in practice with the PI’s measure of positive, negative, instructional, and motivational self-talk. Players reported their personal motivation for sport using the Achievement Goal Scale for Youth Sports (AGSYS; Cumming et al., 2008) and their perceptions of the coach motivational climate using the Motivational Climate Scale for Youth Sports (MCSYS; Smith et al., 2007). It was expected that players who reported the use of self-talk would also be observed to use self-talk. In addition, it was expected that self-talk would predict performance and relate to personal motivation and perceptions of the coach climate.

Players reported using self-talk often in tennis. Most of their phrases were positive and instructional as compared to negative self-talk (ASTQS), and most self-talk was reportedly inside their head as compared to aloud or whispered (STUQ). Players were observed to use mostly negative self-talk (80%), less positive self-talk (15%), and very little instructional self-talk (5%). Players who talked more often in practice scenarios also talked in match-play. Correlations between self-report and observation showed that players who reported talking more often and more aloud during tennis actually talked more on the court. Reported self-talk measured by predetermined positive and negative phrases was completely unrelated to observed self-talk.

Bivariate analyses of speech and performance suggested that players could have used negative self-talk out of a reaction to losing points in their match. To analyze a sequence of speech and future performance, a multi-level modeling analysis was conducted with speech used at one time predicting performance on the subsequent point. Results showed that players using positive self-talk were at greater odds of winning the point after compared to players not using positive self-talk. The use of instructional self-talk on a given point of a set was marginally related to winning the point afterward. Reported positive self-talk was related to both a strong mastery orientation (AGSYS) and a strong mastery-oriented climate (MCSYS).

There is a compelling case for studying self-talk by comparing observation and report. The research also that advanced methodology and statistical analyses should be used to study self-talk, performance, and motivation. Future work will explore the connections of self-talk to the natural context of athlete motivation and performance in sports outside of tennis. This work will also be useful to examining other contexts where self-talk and motivation develop.

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