



Psychological preparation of coaches to work with athletes with autism spectrum disorders

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Abstract

Objective of the study was to scientific substantiation of the technology of psychological preparation of trainers for interaction with persons with autism spectrum disorders.

Methods and structure of the study. Analysis of literary and other information sources, summarizing the experience of specialists, survey, focus group. The collection of empirical data was carried out during the implementation of advanced training courses "Psychological training of coaches for work in sports for people with intellectual disabilities" (teacher A.G. Gretsov), 18 specialists participated.

Results and conclusions. A program of psychological training of coaches to work with athletes with autism spectrum disorders is proposed, designed to increase the effectiveness of interaction with them, as well as personal satisfaction with professional activities. It is advisable to include in the psychological training of trainers working in this field: the study of the psychological characteristics of people with autism spectrum disorders; training in the development of special communication skills for working with this contingent; mastering the basic techniques of psychological support for such athletes; personal training (realization of the subjective meaning of work in this area, search for personal resources, etc.).

Keywords: *sports of people with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, training of trainers.*

Introduction. Athletes with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) represent the most heterogeneous group both in terms of physical development and psychological characteristics. Persons with ASD in sports in most cases cannot compete on an equal footing with other groups of persons with intellectual disabilities; within this nosological group, a very narrow stratum of participants can also really claim high sports achievements.

As a result, coaches working in the sport of persons with intellectual disabilities (PID) (in contrast to specialists in adaptive physical culture working with a similar contingent) most often interact with people whose ASD is presented in a relatively mild, partially compensated form - otherwise such athletes simply could not stand the competition with rivals. At the same time, the fact of a significant decrease in intelligence in such athletes always takes place. Individu-

als with pronounced signs of ASD in behavioral terms, but with intact intelligence ("Asperger's syndrome"), remain outside the scope of the modern sports functional classification, since one of the most important criteria in it concerns a decrease in intelligence, expressed quantitatively (IQ index).

In this regard, the task of training coaching staff to work with people with ASD is relevant. On the one hand, it is solved through the development of methodological aspects of sports training. Persons with ASD have features of physical development - in particular, motor disorders, proprioceptive sensitivity are common. Undoubtedly, this reduces the possibility of their sports achievements (especially in complex coordination disciplines) and requires consideration in the work of a coach. However, such violations are still not so fundamental as to make it impossible to extrapolate methods from both the "traditional" sport of PID and



from ordinary sport. On the other hand, it is necessary to prepare trainers to take into account the psychological characteristics of such people, and above all, to communicate effectively with them. The specificity of working with athletes with ASD is most clearly manifested precisely in this aspect.

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Results of the study and their discussion. Data characterizing the attitude of coaches to work with athletes with ASD, and the difficulties that arise in this case, were obtained in a group of specialists (n=18) who took advanced training courses. All of them work in the sport of PID, represent different sports disciplines (a comparative analysis was not carried out due

to the small sample size) and have experience of interacting with representatives of various nosological groups: "classic" intellectual disability, ASD, Down syndrome (see table).

Thus, experts note that it is more difficult to work with people with ASD than with other groups related to the sport of PID, and they are unanimous in their opinion that special training is needed for this. The knowledge and skills that are missing for effective work relate, first of all, to understanding and taking into account the characteristics of this contingent, and not the sport of PID in general or general methodological issues.

Opinions about the groups of which it is advisable for such athletes to engage in (question 3) differ, but the option of inclusion with ordinary athletes slightly prevails. Classes in general groups with people with intellectual disabilities of a different nature are not very desirable, since such conditions are stressful for people with ASD, which encourages them to withdraw into themselves even more.

The challenges faced by coaches working with athletes with ASD were fleshed out during a focus group discussion with the same participants. The main difficulties are as follows:

Results of a survey of specialists working in the field of PID sports

Question	Answer options
Assess the difficulty of working with different categories of people involved in PID sports (score on a 5-point scale)	«Classic» intellectual disability - 3.9 ASD - 4.3 Persons with Down syndrome - 3.6
Is it necessary to single out athletes with ASD in a separate sports-functional class?	Yes - 78% No - 5% Difficult to answer - 17%
Should athletes with ASD train with others like them?	Yes, it is better to form separate groups of them - 28% They can train with other PID sport groups – 21% Better inclusive model (training with regular athletes) – 40% Difficult to answer - 11%
What kind of knowledge, skills do you lack to work with athletes with ASD?	Reflecting the specifics of ASD - 40% Reflecting the specifics of PID sports - 28% About the theory and methodology of sports training in general - 16% General psychological and pedagogical - 16%
Is special training required to work with athletes with ASD compared to other types of PID?	Yes - 100%



- People with ASD periodically seem to “hang out”, withdraw into themselves, and contact with them is interrupted.

- Feedback is difficult: when you explain something to such a person, it is not clear whether he understood or not.

- These people are not inclined to obey the rules set from the outside; one gets the impression that they live by the rules that they have created for themselves.

- When difficulties arise, an athlete with ASD does not seek help, but, on the contrary, withdraws into himself.

- A person with ASD may react to our words and actions in completely unexpected ways. In general, the behavior of such people is difficult to predict, the coach requires constant attention and control.

- Athletes with ASD have poor imitation, and instructions such as “do it like me/like someone else” are hard to come by.

- An athlete with ASD is easily “knocked out” by any unexpected situation when something went wrong (especially in competitions).

- Athletes with ASD do well with repetitive, cyclical activities, but perform much worse in situations where the nature of the activity needs to change quickly (such as in sports).

- The work is difficult in personal terms: it requires the investment of large emotional resources, and the “return” is less than we would like. This causes dissatisfaction with their own activities, increases the risk of professional burnout.

The analysis of the identified difficulties is the basis of the program of psychological training of specialists to work with athletes with ASD. It includes four modules and is designed for 16 academic hours.

Module 1. Psychological characteristics of persons with ASD. For successful coaching with such a contingent, it is more important not so much to master the psychological and medical theories that explain the nature of ASD, but to understand how the pedagogical impact will be perceived, taking into account the mental characteristics of the addressee. The intellect of these people does not function “worse”, but is qualitatively different from that of ordinary peers. It is necessary to be able to mentally reconstruct their subjective reality in order to adequately select ways to influence them. It is proposed to pay the main attention to the analysis of cases that reflect various situations that arise during pedagogical interaction with this contingent. Using their examples, specialists should be taught to “look at what is happening through the eyes of their wards”, to predict how this or that situation will

be interpreted in their subjective reality, and what behavioral consequences it may lead to.

Module 2. Training for the development of special communication skills for working with people with ASD. Communication skills are effectively developed in the course of trainings, which implies game-technical modeling of situations that serve as a source of personal experience, and the creation of conditions for its reflection. The training includes the following sections:

- Improving the use of verbal and non-verbal means of communication.

- Training of social observation, receptivity.

- Communication techniques for effective interaction with people with ASD.

Module 3. Basic techniques of psychological support for athletes with ASD. It is the coach who often turns out to be the one from whom psychological support is expected in the first place (especially if they are people with ASD, whose social activity is extremely limited). The task of turning a trainer into a counseling psychologist is not set, however, mastering some professional methods of individual and group psychological work will allow you to act more effectively than just guided by intuition. Relevant techniques of short-term counseling and psychological training, allowing to influence the emotional sphere. In particular, it is proposed to master:

- Basic communication skills that allow you to have a helpful dialogue (active listening, paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, techniques of “joining” with the interlocutor).

- Techniques of rapid impact on the emotional sphere (use of means of visual and plastic expression, suggestion and self-hypnosis).

- Methods of self-regulation, overcoming stress (relaxation techniques, breathing exercises).

- Techniques of group psychological work aimed at interaction in a team, increasing the degree of emotional involvement in classes.

Module 4. Personal training for professionals working with athletes with ASD. Main areas of work:

- Reflection of the personal meaning of professional activity in sports PID.

- Planning the trajectory of professional self-development, awareness of resources and obstacles.

- Improving the skills of time management, goal setting and planning.

- Psychology of stress, methods of self-regulation in stressful situations.

Increased attention is paid to the prevention of professional burnout of a specialist. In particular, for this



it is important to be able to psychologically distance yourself from work at a time when you are not directly involved in it, not to transfer professional difficulties to self-esteem on a personal level, maintain yourself in a “resource state”, reflect and control your negative emotional states.

The described modules can be carried out within the framework of advanced training courses for trainers, as well as in the preparation of students receiving education in the field of adaptive physical culture and sports.

Conclusions. It is advisable to separate athletes with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) into a separate sports functional class, which is due to the pronounced specificity of this nosological group. Coaches working with such athletes need special training, in which psychological aspects play a key role.

In the psychological training of trainers working in this area, it is advisable to include: the study of the psychological characteristics of people with ASD; training in the development of special communication skills for working with this contingent; mastering the basic techniques of psychological support for such athletes; personal training (realization of the subjective meaning of work in this area, search for personal resources, etc.).

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