

CHECK UP FROM THE NECK UP

How Dr. P's Performance Psychology can change how we see the mental game

A Q&A WITH PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGIST DR. RICK PEREA

Editor's Note: Dr. Rick Perea, Ph.D. – or “Dr. P” as his friends and clients know him – is a Performance Psychologist to the stars, and now, many every-day people.

Dr. P has served as the team psychologist for the Colorado Rockies, Denver Nuggets, Miami Dolphins, Cleveland Browns and the 2015 World Champion Denver Broncos just to name a few. Further, he has been the personal psychologist for some of the most famous entertainers and coaches in the world.

A performance psychologist is fundamentally different from a clinical, forensic or social psychologist. First, psychology in general traditionally delineated pathology; or in simpler terms, “what’s wrong with people and essentially their behavior.” As such, behavior was looked at through a pathology lens and essentially kept the brain in a depressed mode that was often difficult to break. Conversely, performance psychology focuses on techniques and protocols that are largely solution based; in other words, if the discussion is not solution based, it’s not on the table for delineation.

Therefore, because performance psychology is focused on solutions and positivity, the brain generally stays in a positive mode during and after sessions. In the last five years, performance psychology is even being used for trauma and suicide ideation. In fact, Dr. P has created a non-profit organization called “Psyked” (psyked.com) specifically designated towards suicide prevention from a performance psychology platform. As such, performance psychology is positioned to make a dramatic impact on how human behavior is not only improved but researched.

Dr. P runs one of the most comprehensive and eclectic performance psychology facilities – “ThinkOne” – in the nation (learn more at ThinkOne4you.org). From brain training, to float tanks and cryotherapy, ThinkOne helps everyone from professional, college and high school athletes, to pilots, surgeons and CEOs shape their thoughts and help them perform at an elite level “from the neck-up.” In addition, Dr. P is a world-class speaker who will inform, motivate and invigorate your team, company or school; information and bookings can be made at drrickperea.com. His presentations have been called “unlike any experience you’ve ever had” and “most authentic delivery I have ever witnessed.” While his presentations cover a wide variety of topics, he is an expert authority in business and sport leadership and will help your organization develop a culture by design – not a culture by default – regardless of industry.

As performance psychology continues to emerge, Dr. Perea – one of the pioneers and leaders in the field – sat down with Mile High Sports to discuss this innovative and vital practice.



Mile High Sports: Before we begin, tell us a little bit about your personal background and how you became interested in psychology?

Dr. Rick Perea: I'm local. I played high school football at George Washington High School. I'm in their hall of fame as a football player. I played college football at the University of Southern Colorado, now CSU-Pueblo. I was a small college All-American and then I was signed by the Broncos in 1983. I was a rookie the same year John Elway was – Karl Mecklenburg, Gary Kubiak and that whole class. Fast forward to 2015 and Kubiak is the head coach, Elway is the GM, and I'm the team psychologist. We started out in '83 as players, and I didn't have the careers those guys did football-wise at least, but one of the things I noticed when I was playing was how many people struggled mentally and emotionally. Back in 1983 through '85, we didn't have guys like me in the NFL, psychologists that you could talk to.

■ **That must have sparked something.**

■ Physically, I was very capable. I was playing well in training camp with the Broncos, but I was struggling emotionally. I didn't feel like I had support or someone to talk to. And so that really highlighted for me the need for a psychologist in pro sports. When I was with the Giants, Lawrence Taylor was there; it illuminated right away that all of us can use help. I saw it throughout the league. I saw it in college sports. I saw it every day with everyday people; a lot of us struggle. Football is a very macho sport, and there are not a lot of guys raising their hand saying they need emotional support. I knew it was something that was going to be needed in the future. When I left the league, I didn't want to play anymore. I just couldn't get the mental side of me to get do it anymore. It just seemed like a very primitive sport. I knew that I had more to offer in the world than just play football. That was the beginning of me deciding to go back to graduate school and get my PhD and come back and help players in the NFL and all pro sports.

■ **Do you have a success story that incentivized you to forge down this path, something that made it click?**



■ There were several. Scott Hastings was a guy who talked about his basketball career and how it could have been improved if he would've had the mental side of the game. He said he felt like he had it physically, but mentally he could've used someone like me. And then there's a coach, Adam Gase, who became the head coach in Miami, I worked with him there. He was a coach who reached out to me, and we worked one-on-one. My work

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with Brock Osweiler during the 2015 season – how ironic is it that when Elway first hired me, he said, “Your first work is with 17”?! I worked (with Brock) all summer prior to the 2015 season. Who would know that Peyton Manning would miss seven games and Brock would go 5-2 in those games? And the work we did in the summer prior to the season ended up being the difference maker. Those are some names that stand out early on that have really fueled my career, that made me say this is worth it.

■ **You received an invite to Canton from DeMarcus Ware, a friend and client. Talk about that relationship and why it was important for you go attend the Hall of Fame induction ceremony.**

■ When DeMarcus first came in to see me during that 2015 season, it wasn't necessarily anything about football. He told me he was a little lost as a person, as a man. He had all the things he could put in a box and cars and homes, but he didn't have his feet underneath him as a person. He needed help with that, which was a very vulnerable place for him to be. So, we ended up being very close in terms of our work together and helping him off the field as a person. Consequently, that helped him on the field. It is about football – he's inducted into the [Pro Football] Hall of Fame – but more importantly about a man who trusted me with his vulnerabilities. That helped him to this day be a great father and a husband to Angela, his wife.

■ **Can you walk us through the typical process when a client comes to you seeking help?**

■ The one thing I want to make clear is that I'm not a therapist. I'm not a clinical psychologist. I'm a performance psychologist. I teach techniques and protocols to people. For example, if I'm working with a quarterback, I teach a technique called “S.I.T.” – stress inoculation technique. It teaches them how to relax and help their nervous system be on the calm side. If I'm working with someone who wants to work off the field on themselves as a person, it's also teaching them techniques to focus and concentrate. It's also about self-reflection, looking at themselves, developing process goals instead of outcome goals. Once people develop process goals, anxiety goes down because they can control process; they can't control outcome. I give people tools to put in their toolbox so that when they're out there in the world – whether it's in their marriage, relationships, work, on the football field, [baseball] diamond or swimming pool, wherever – they can regulate anxiety. That's what's really cool about what I do – it will help husbands and wives in their relationship, moms and dads in their relationship with their kids, but it will also help hall of famers sack the quarterback. Performance psychology is the future.

■ **It sounds like your practice started with sports in mind but has clearly gone on to benefit anyone in any walk of life.**

■ Yes. In fact, we developed an organization called “Psyked,” which is based on suicide prevention, and we're using performance psychology for the first time to attack and mitigate suicide. This will help reduce the stigma and it will teach people tools in a quick way. I can help someone in two sessions and get them to a good place for success. That's the difference between the old therapy that was based on pathology – “What's wrong with a person?” – versus what performance psychology is, which is positive, supportive and it's tool-based. We teach people actual tools and techniques, so they have them in their toolbox when real bullets are flying in life. I would say my client base is 70 percent sports, 30 percent everyday people, but it's changing by the minute. More people are realizing, “This guy can help me be a better dentist! This guy can help me be a better CEO!” I've been around football my whole life and I enjoy it, but I love helping a lawyer be better, an engineer or a mom or dad be better.

■ **Does the modern athlete have new and difficult challenges that are different now than back in the day?**

■ It's a much more challenging climate and culture out there for the athlete because sports are a very social comparative industry. In social psychology, we study how people's behavior changes in the presence of others. When you're playing in a football game in front of an audience your behavior is going to change versus when there's nobody in the stands. Let me give you an example; when I played, if you made All-Conference or All-State or committed to a college, maybe some of your friends and family knew and your coaches knew. Today there are kids on the internet; they get offered a scholarship and they announce it on Instagram. If they visit a college, they announce it on Instagram. If they get any kind of award, they announce it on Instagram. There's so much social comparison today, electronically, that we didn't have back in the day. If you're on the short end of the stick on that social comparison piece, it's really tough. I've seen kids at Cherry Creek High School going to Ohio State and Oregon and Iowa – big schools. And then there are other kids that don't get those big offers and they think, “What's wrong with me?” There's so much immediate, electronic comparison today that you have a lot of kids really getting down on themselves and even depressed because they don't stand up to the test. People only put their best out there on Instagram. They don't talk about their struggles. They talk about their victories, all the things they're doing great. Only 5 percent

of the kids get offers out of high school. That leaves 95 percent who aren't; it's a very challenging climate and culture today that we didn't have back in the day. And it's all based on social comparison and it's all immediate electronically.

■ **If there's a school, team, coach, parent or athlete out there seeking help or looking to benefit from your skills, how and why would you encourage them to consider working with ThinkOne?**

■ Typically, when I see a kid these days, it's one of two things: They're either underperforming or it's mental health. Either way, there are a lot of things I work on with them. I always tell athletes to keep it small. Whether it's the Super Bowl or a preseason game, it's always the same. I teach process instead of end result. I also work with parents and help them in how to distance themselves – not from their child – but from the adulation and the expectations. I teach them to allow the child to own their own motivation. Whether it's an athlete or anyone else, if they're not working on the mental side of their game, I believe they're performing at about 70 percent of their potential. I can educate someone the difference between the sympathetic and parasympathetic side and how to get there and stay there. If you can give an athlete the tools and techniques, you have given that athlete the freedom to be their very best.

■ **You've accomplished a lot in your career already, but where do you want to see it go? What are some goals and ambitions you have?**

■ I would love to help remove the stigma with mental health. All I want to see is people understand how important the mental side of the game is. I just want it to be normalized – that mental health is “cool.” Mental health is not a bad term. It's not a bad word. It's positive. I'm telling you, when you get the help and you reach your potential in life, it's beauty.

■ **You've had a longtime relationship with Sandy Clough, who is now a host on Mile High Sports Radio. What have you and Sandy got in store for everyone this football season?**

■ We're going to have what we call “Mental Mondays.” I have Mental Mondays on my podcast, and we're going to link those to the radio show. I'm going to give a little nugget to anyone out there who's a performer. And if you think about it, everyone is a performer – in your sport, at your job, in your relationships. I'll give tips and answer questions. It's “Mental Mondays” with Dr. P., where you “get your checkup from the neck up.”

