

# The Times

# SPORTS

Tuesday, January 18, 2005

## Through sports psychology, athletes are gaining ... **A mental edge before the physical challenge**

By **CRAIG HALEY**  
Assistant Sports Editor

Last season's holiday break was not just long for The College of New Jersey men's basketball team because four weeks passed between games. The days also moved slowly because the Lions couldn't escape their 4-4 record, which they felt was underachieving.

The monotony changed on the day the players arrived at Packer Hall and found not basketballs awaiting them, but a visitor along with head coach John Castaldo and his assistants.

The players had no idea what was in store for them. There was no dribbling or shooting that day. The visitor, Keith Waldman, led them through a sports psychology workshop.

"We thought it was another one of (Castaldo's) tricks," forward Derrick Grant says with a laugh more than a year later.

Castaldo, then in his 11th season at TCNJ, had thought long about the benefits of having his players learn through sports psychology. Considering some of the team's key players were coming off being injured, the team lacked overall chemis-

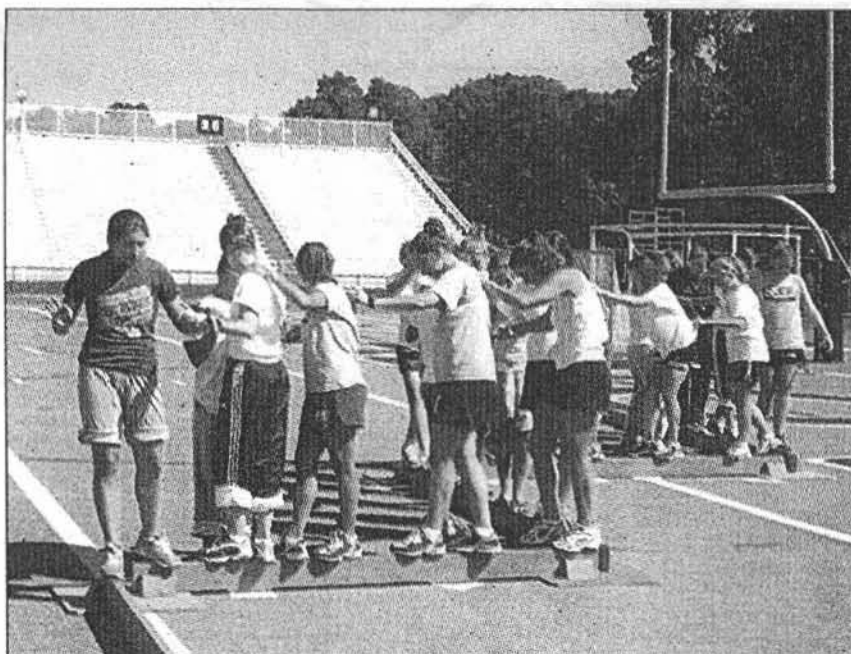
try and that TCNJ women's soccer coach Joe Russo had caught Castaldo's ear about his program's successful work with Waldman, Castaldo thought this was his ideal opportunity.

More than three hours later, the TCNJ coaches and players ended practice believing what other people have discovered — that sports psychology can boost athletic performances. Such work can teach an athlete how to prepare better mentally for competition and concentrate and relax more during it.

After five straight seasons of hovering around .500, TCNJ won its first four games out of the holiday break and went on to enjoy an 18-9 season while making the New Jersey Athletic Conference playoffs for the first time since 1998. Exactly how much credit should go to Waldman couldn't be answered. The Lions, though, were positive that he helped them find their way.

"I think what he did," Castaldo said, "was not so much what he did that benefited us during those three, four hours that he was there. I think it was more the after-effect, the relying on each other, what tools do you learn (for) in January

*(over)*



Villanova field hockey players participate in "Tittle March Toward Success," a team-building activity during a workshop with Optimal Performance Associates. The activity teaches athletes not to look too far ahead during their season.

Photo courtesy of  
Optimal Performance  
Associates

# Athletes given tools to trust, communicate

Continued from Page C1

and in February."

"That day just let us exhale and just relax," Grant said. "From that point on, practice became more fun. Everybody was focused on getting the job done."

Keith Waldman might as well be Tony Robbins in gym shorts. A typical workshop with the 41-year-old, who in 1997 started the Optimal Performance Associates company in Cherry Hill, is part cheerleading, part counseling, part instructional, part motivational, part soul-searching.

"I do a combination of things," Waldman said. "I don't come in and give a lecture. I kind of see myself as a coach. I do a look at team-building."

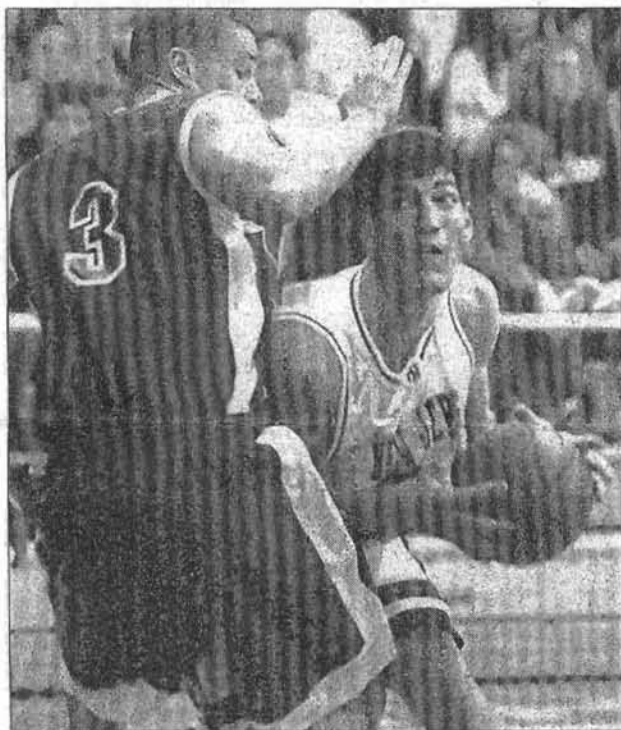
Waldman, who holds master's degrees in social work from the University of Michigan and in sports psychology from Temple University, and is licensed in social work, has worked with numerous college and high school athletes and teams and also gives instruction at NCAA workshops.

He believes an athlete must take control of his confidence and preparation and be held accountable to both himself and the team. In an effort to give coaches and players insight and strategies for improvement, Waldman builds his workshops around a series of hands-on activities, which emphasize commitment to teammates and the team and are based from the theories of "Experiential Education & Sports Psychology," pioneered by the international non-profit organization Outward Bound and Project Adventure.

Initially, the activities might seem a bit wacky to the participants, but they offer the possibility of a mental edge through increased communication, decision-making and problem-solving skills, mutual respect and leadership, and goal setting.

One of the activities the TCNJ team participated in was "Raising the Bar," which taught them the need to constantly seek improvement. The Lions were split into two groups, and each one had five attempts in the timed activity. Thirty numbers were placed in a circle, couldn't be moved around and had to be touched sequentially. Only one person was allowed to be in the circle at a time and each participant had to touch a number once as the team put the numbers in order. There were obstacles in the circle and various penalties for the participants, who had to be accountable to their mistakes.

After each activity, Waldman and the Lions discussed the results. In "Raising the Bar," the Lions learned the value of com-



Staff photo by Stanley Brick

Members of The College of New Jersey basketball program felt forward Scott Findlay benefited the most from working last season with Keith Waldman of Optimal Performance Associates. He had been coming off an ankle injury and was not playing confidently, but improved considerably after the workshop.

## PUTTING 'WE' BEFORE 'ME'

The College of New Jersey men's basketball players had different memories of what they gained the most during their workshop activities with Keith Waldman last season:

Senior guard Bobby Henning: "Just cooperation. You can have as many individuals on one team, and if you're not playing together as a team, then what gets in your way is no cooperation."

Senior guard Kyle Burke: "He stressed a lot of not pointing fingers. If someone screws up, you all screw up."

Senior forward Derick Grant: "I'd say teamwork. In the beginning, there were mats on the floor and everybody was tied to each other. And the person behind you was blindfolded. You couldn't individually cross (the mat) by yourself, you had to worry about who was behind you — incorporate the team and not just yourself."

Redshirt junior forward Scott Findlay: "I think trusting your team was what we accomplished as the goal for everybody. The big thing was if you tried to do it all yourself, you just couldn't do it yourself."

munication and in trusting each other even if their ideas were different. They had to raise the bar of success while pushing and supporting each other at the same time.

"What I do with one team I don't necessarily do with another," Waldman said.

Likewise, what one sports psychologist or social worker might instruct may be different from another one. "It's about getting an edge," Waldman said. "I'm not going in and doing clinical work. I'm going in and doing highly interactive activities."

sports psychologists, has grown considerably as more and more athletes, from the high-school level up to the college, Olympic and professional levels, seek to learn a mental edge.

Susan Reese, the executive director of AAASP, said statistics are not available for the growth in sports psychology, but added the AAASP's board of directors have discussed the need for such a study considering the way the field has blossomed over the last decade.

The use of positive thoughts and imagery can be quite pervasive for athletes. Dr. Michael Sachs, chairman of the kinesiology department at Temple University, said sports psychologists measure their success in two ways, quantitatively through an athlete's increased performance and qualitatively through an athlete's comfort level.

"It's really an emerging field," said Dr. Kate Hays, who runs The Performing Edge in Toronto. "A sports psychologist has to have training in sports sciences and in psychology. Only people who are licensed can call themselves a psychologist."

Recently a college baseball player walked into Dr. Hays' office and said he knew many professional athletes have benefited from work with a sports psychologist and he wanted to benefit, too.

"It's that kind of increased awareness that is changing things," Dr. Hays said.

Athletes and coaches not familiar with sports psychology might be apprehensive about the prospect of working with it. The misconception of someone lying on a doctor's couch often is frowned upon.

In team sports, a coach may already be serving as a team's therapist in addition to being its strategist and may see little reason to have outside assistance, noted Dr. Ruth L. Hall, who teaches a sports and exercise psychology course at TCNJ.

"Sometimes there's a negative connotation, where you're seeing a psychologist and you're sick," said Crooks, who has coached Rutgers women's soccer since 2000. "But that's not really the case. Sports is so physical and mental that treating it as important as possible makes sense."

When Rutgers hired Crooks, he wanted to keep any problems within his team. Then he met Waldman at a summer camp and became receptive to tackling adversity with outside help. Before his team's 2003 season, he felt his team could benefit from additional work in the chemistry lab and brought Waldman in for a workshop.

The Scarlet Knights performed

Waldman's activities and also devoted time to candid talking about potential problems. There were some tears, Crooks pointed out, but a lot of bonding, too. What stands out to him is that one of his out-of-state players didn't feel like she fit in well with her teammates, but learned during their conversation that she was highly respected among her teammates.

Crooks was so impressed with the benefits of sports psychology that he had Waldman revisit his team for a second workshop last winter. Castaldo did the same during the TCNJ men's basketball team's holiday break last month.

"I think you can always learn," Castaldo said. "I think the biggest thing you learn every year is getting individuals to accept their roles, and that role impacts the team. There are reasons for it. You know, why am I coming off the bench? Why am I getting better and I'm still coming off the bench?"

"We were able to realize," point guard Bobby Henning said, "what we needed to pinpoint in terms in getting better."

The Association of Advanced Applied Sports Psychology in Middleton, Wisc., the nation's only organization of certified