**COACH’S CORNER**

**BOWLS AND ‘BURN-OUT’**

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**Introduction**

In physical sports such as rugby, soccer, hockey, athletics and swimming, there is mounting concern about the number of games players are playing in a year. This is presently a problem for cricketers who have to choose between representing their country and making money in a professional league. The spotlight is on burn-out in sport.  Does this have relevance for bowlers? Many think not, because bowls is not a physical sport.

But are we forgetting that burn-out in business managers and teachers is a well-documented phenomenon? This is more akin to the bowlers’ situation. It’s more a mental and psychological issue than a physical one. And let us also not forget the many comments that sports scientist Tim Noakes has made about player burn-out and its effect on performance.

This brings us to the life-time study of stress by Professor Hans Selye, director of the Institute of Experimental Medicine and Surgery at the University of Montreal, who developed the general adaptation syndrome (GAS), and wrote the widely acclaimed book ‘The Stress of Life’ in 1956.

**The Stress Syndrome**

Selye defined stress as the non-specific response of the body to any demands made upon it. He pointed out that ‘Without stress there would be no life’, but if the demands become too great, then there are problems. In his GAS, Selye identified three stages:

**Stage 1: Alarm Reaction:** Any physical or mental stress will trigger an immediate set of reactions that combat the stress. During this period the immune system is depressed, making us more susceptible to infection. If the stress is not severe or long-lasting (bowers note), we bounce back and recover quickly.

**Stage 2. Resistance:** Eventually we adapt to stress and our immune system becomes more resistant. We become complacent about our situation and believe that we are immune from the effects of stress. This is the danger period, as we fail to take precautions.

**Stage 3. Exhaustion:** The effort to combat stress drains the resources of the body, of which there is a limited supply, and problems begin to occur. If the stress is too intense, or too prolonged, it will begin to affect our health. It affects the homeostasis of the body – the natural balance of hormones and chemicals in the body that allows normal functioning.

(See the internet for further information (Google: Hans Selye and sport).

**Hans Selye’s GAS and Sport**

In the 1950’s two of the world’s great swimming coaches, Australian Forbes Carlisle, and American Jim Counsilman, realised the importance of the GAS for their swimmers and its effect on performance. This was the beginning of the concept of ‘periodisation’ in sport, which soon spread to athletics and other sports. It was realised that training and competition had to be structured into a program with recovery periods to ensure peak performance when it was most needed. Athletes worked through ‘cycles’ in the program. The cycles were based on weekly, monthly and annual periods, and even on the 4 year period between world and Olympic events.

Unfortunately money and sponsorship has entered the picture and top-class performers are having excessive demands placed upon them, especially in the team sports, which are causing serious problems. In the quest for top performance drugs are also being used to combat the stress of training and competing.

Much of the focus has been on the physical breakdowns and injury, but there is absolutely no doubt that mental fatigue also occurs and that also affects performance.

**Bowls and Stress**

Skill is a key factor for success in bowls. The accuracy required by the bowler in matches depends upon the brain effectively controlling the muscles. To perform its functions the brain relies on chemicals and hormones to allow the neurons to operate efficiently. The ability of the body to produce these hormones/chemicals depends upon nutrition and rest. But if there are insufficient recovery periods the endocrine system does not have sufficient time to keep up the supply.

Bowls requires concentration, and recovery periods are necessary to allow the bowler to become refreshed and eager to compete. The danger is that the effects of playing day in and day out are insidious and gradually creep up on us. It becomes an effort to maintain concentration, decision-making is impaired, accuracy is lost, performance becomes inconsistent, and matches become a chore, rather than enjoyable and challenging experiences.

Are we talking about our top semi-professional bowlers (yes, they do exist)? Not at all. Many of our bowlers in lower divisions are playing almost every day of the week.

Coaches and selectors want bowlers to come to structured training and squad training. Add in the demands of families, work, travelling in heavy traffic, and all the other demands of modern life, then we can see that the supply of adaptation energy is sapped. And we wonder why performances drop at the Inter Provincial and other events. And we also wonder why we cannot get people to serve on club committees, as technical officials, and as coaches.

**POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

The logical answer is that if bowlers wish to embark on an upward curve of improving their performance they should reduce the number of competitions they compete in. How is this to be done?

          1. Reduce the number of competitions.

          2. Bowlers enter fewer events.

**Reduce the competitions**

This would have to take place at club level, but many events are ‘traditional’ and clubs use others to generate funds and provide fun for social bowlers. But clubs could take a long hard look at their programs and cut out ‘dead wood’, perhaps those events that are just there because there is a trophy. Drawn events in club championships may no longer serve the purpose for which they were introduced many years ago when there were far fewer events and travel was difficult.

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**Bowlers entering fewer events**

This would appear to be the more effective solution. All bowlers should look carefully at their programs and understand that if they really wish to have an upward improvement curve then they have to allow time for recovery and time for practice. And clubs must stop pressuring bowlers to enter. If an event is not supported drop it out of the program.

There are many bowlers who only wish to play for fun and enjoyment, and they can play more events by not allowing time for practice, but even they should monitor their feelings, and if it becomes a drag to play, take a break.

A rule of thumb guide: Play a match 2 - 3 times per week.

         Practice twice a week.

         Recovery 2-3 days a week.

If there is an intensive period, requiring 4 or more events in a week, take a break and maybe have a practice session emphasising rhythm.

At the end of the season, bowlers should take a break from bowls.  A complete break of about 3-4 weeks is recommended.