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GWU Offers Sports Psychology Course for Upcoming Fall Semester

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Office of University Communications

May 5, 2014

Dr. Brooke Thompson Explains Links Between Athletic Performance and Psychological Theories

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – Unexplained poor athletic performance is sometimes called “The Yips.” An athlete may have experienced profound success in their sport, and then suddenly, for no apparent reason, they begin struggling. One day, they are at the top of their game; the next day, they can’t seem to perform the basic skills they mastered years before.

The field of sports psychology examines how psychology influences sports, performance, exercise and physical activity. Gardner-Webb University will offer a semester-long sports psychology course during the upcoming fall semester. Dr. Brooke Thompson, assistant professor of psychology in the GWU School of Psychology and Counseling, will head up the new class.

“We’re focused on enhancing performance and enhancing the sport experience. We’re going to look at some of the psychological principles and different psychological concepts that make sport performance better,” Thompson explained. “We’ll talk about how athletes deal with anxiety and how they deal with pain. We’ll look at how they manage intense workouts and training regimens as well as performances, which can be taxing at times as well.”

A college athlete herself, Thompson remembers the mental and physical stress that can sometimes be induced through one’s athletic training and performance. However, the principles aren’t only applicable to athletes.

“We all perform in various capacities. Some of the strategies that we learn can carry over into the classroom,” she offered. “If you’re anxious about taking a test, you can relate the same ideas to anxiety in a sport. I like to teach the class so that the students are experiencing some of the same principles we discuss. So we will do a lot of lab exercises and activities in which students will actually be put on display and will have to perform in front of their peers. Then they will be able to see what it feels like and how they can effectively deal with those emotions.”

So how does she explain sudden poor athletic performance? “One particular concept we often discuss is called ‘ironic processing,’” Thompson shared. “You may experience poor performance, and then begin thinking, ‘I hope I don’t mess up. I hope I don’t do this or do

that.’ So when you are constantly telling yourself not to do something, your brain sometimes doesn’t process that word ‘not.’ Because you are thinking about ‘not’ doing a certain thing, your brain does exactly what you’re telling it ‘not’ to do.”

She believes positive self-talk (offering specific information on what the athlete wants to achieve) is an effective strategy for enhancing performance. “Instead of thinking about what you shouldn’t do, you need to think about what you should do,” said Thompson. “So it may take some re-training to frame it positively.”

Listed as Psychology 320, the course will be cross-listed for exercise science students as well as for psychology majors. Initially offered once a year, the sports psychology class may be taught more frequently depending on demand. Other topics to be discussed include the phenomenon of fandom and a closer look at the psychology involved in refereeing.

“Because it is the topic of sports psychology and performance, it’s a perfect fit to offer some practical application opportunities,” Thompson reflected. “I like to make it experiential and that is an interesting aspect of the course.”

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University blends a liberal arts core curriculum with more than 55 major and minor professional programs of study, a comprehensive academic experience that flows from our Christian commitment to intellectual freedom, service and leadership.