

Effectiveness of sports psychology



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With reference to published literature critically discuss the factors influencing the effectiveness of a sport psychologist

Introduction

Sport psychology has grown remarkably from its roots in the amorphous and poorly understood disciplines of athlete motivation and performance counselling 40 years ago (Dosit, 2005; Cox, 2005). Modern sport at every level of competition and in virtually every sporting activity has benefited from the application of psychological principles and mental training in the pursuit of maximum athletic performance, stress management, improved training attitude and every other aspect of sport where the mind, emotions and physical performance intersect.

Sport psychology is unique amongst the applied psychology disciplines for a number of reasons. The phrase suggests that there are accepted common practices employed by sports psychologists and its is acknowledged as with any science, the baseline approaches to the education, training and certification of the sport psychologist are well understood across the world of sport and athletic competition. The feature of sports psychology practice that tends to differentiate it from other form of applied psychology is the general closeness of the relationships developed between an individual athlete and their psychologist. The common professional boundaries of professional detachment are different in sports environments where intense emotion and competitive desire are the fuel that both drives the athlete onwards and makes them vulnerable to psychological stresses. Many sport psychologists play a multi-dimensional role in the lives of their athlete clients – trained professional psychologist, friend, sounding board, confidante and advisor are

each possible and entirely ethical component to the relationships that may develop in practise (Watson, 2008, 1).

This paper considers the question of ‘effectiveness’ of the sports psychologist as considered within the following analytical and discussion framework. A detailed and properly academic analysis of why the science of sports psychology is effective in the context of competitive and recreational sport is beyond the scope of this paper. The discussion that is developed below is premised on the proposition that sports psychology is a proven and well accepted body of science that applied in accordance with its principles will generally benefit an athlete. All athletes in all sports, team and individual from cross country running to equestrienne events, in all age groups and genders are amenable to its benefits (Kornspan & McCracken, 2003: 36; Donohue, 2001: 19). The important question in the present context is what factors, professional and personal render a sports psychologist successful in a particular application. Included in this discrete issue are a wide variety of potential ethical considerations.

The question requires that a preliminary working definition of sport psychologist be articulated; the definition as stated below also assists in defining the general areas of professional engagement within sport. The discussion will then engage two broad and interrelated questions: what steps sports psychologists take in any given assignment to achieve maximum effect with their athlete; where are the typical problem areas that require attention in the sports psychologist / athlete relationship? The emphasis of the discussion will be directed to *Educational Sports Psychologists* as this

area of sport psychology provides the most immediate connections between athletic performance and the application of psychological principles.

These questions also require consideration of the type of person who is more likely to succeed as a sports psychologist – as with any professional activity where the subject is a human being, the delicate interface between the knowledge based psychological education that helps to comprise ones intellect and the often empathetic talent of “ dealing” with people is important (Armstrong, 2001; Griffin, 2008: 10). The paper draws upon the significant representative sampling of the authorities as appended to this paper in this regard.

The paper concludes with some thoughts concerning the anticipated continued expansion of the sport psychologist role at all levels of sport. If these professionals have not already achieved such status in most sports, it is submitted that the progression observed in the relationship between athletes and sports psychologist will trace the progression from pop psychology to important training and coaching asset to an indispensable component of the training regimes and competitive performance of all serious athletes.

Sport Psychology – definition and scope of the discipline

The literal definition of sports psychology is a deceptively straightforward one. According to Cox (1998) and confirmed as accepted throughout the literature, sport psychology is a “...science in which the principles of psychology are applied in a sport or exercise setting” (p. 4). The definition does not depend on the presence of a professional relationship with elite or

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aspiring high performance athletes; the principles of sport psychology apply with necessary circumstantial modification to every level of athlete. In this paper, the term “ sport psychologist” shall extend to any professional engaged in the psychology of sport or exercise (Douthitt & Harvey, 1995: Griffin, 2008)).

As a general proposition there are three different types of sport psychologists recognised in the field; a great deal of the work carried out by a sport psychologist may include work in more than one category in the case of a particular athlete or assignment. For the purposes of the discussions set out below, the boundaries between each sub discipline shall be regarded as relatively fixed. In the present discussion, it is assumed that each category member is a fully trained and accredited psychologist as defined by the relevant statute in their jurisdiction (British Psychological Society, 2009: American Psychological Society, 2009).

The first category is the *Clinical/ Counselling Sport Psychologist* (Cox, 2005). This person is trained in clinical or counselling psychology and is a licensed psychologist. These psychologists are trained to assist athletes to deal effectively with emotional and personality disorder issues that affect particular athletes. The range of prospective sport patients that this professional might assist is very broad; an example would include treating a female gymnast who suffers from bulimia or other eating disorder given the competitive pressures to perform at a specific weight. Treating a downhill skier or motorsports racer who has difficulties recovering from a particular crash or injury might be another.

The second category is the grouping that includes the *Educational Sport Psychologist* (Cox, 2005; Kramer & Moran, 2008). These psychologists come to sport with an extensive academic and practical background in university departments of physical education and sport specific training. The objective of an intervention or ongoing assistance provided by these individuals is to assist the athlete to develop a wide range of potential psychological skills for performance enhancement. Specific techniques such as various mental imagery sequences, self talk, the building of pre performance or pre competition routines are all included in the work carried out by the psychologists in this category (Morris & Summers, 2004; Boyce & King, 1993). These psychologists also provide services to athletes in a team environment.

This particular definition also provides an important qualification concerning the general role of psychology in sport. Sport psychologists are not monopolists in this area. Many athletes have the benefit of psychological support as provided by a trainer, a position coach or a team manager (Kornspan & Duve, 2006; Wilson & Stephens, 2005). This element of sport psychology is very important but is excluded from consideration here.

The final category is the *Research Sport Psychologist*. This group is comprised of scientists and scholars of sport psychology. Theirs is an important support role to the entire discipline (Cox, 2005). Sport provides science with ongoing opportunities to gain access to athletes and teams in every sport from its preseason, in season and post season /off season periodization. The psychologists engage in ongoing research and experiments in the field.

Applied sport psychology

Applied sport and exercise psychology involves the extension of psychology theory and research into a specific field. While the particular athlete or team will inevitably attract the most attention in these applications, given that the pursuit of athletic excellence is a primary objective, the psychologist has a significant role to play in the education of any coaches, teammates, parents, fitness professionals, and athletic trainers about the psychological aspects of the specific sport or exercise activity. Applied sport and exercise psychologists seek to facilitate maximal involvement, performance, and enjoyment in any sport environment.

The practice of applied sport and exercise psychology usually involves a combination of individual and group consulting or counseling depending on the style of the professional conducting the intervention and the needs of the client. The reality of amateur sport is that many athletes do not have the access or means to have a personal psychological consultant (Maclean & Hamm, 2008: 352). Notwithstanding access questions, the principles that support a proper practitioner / athlete relationship are the same.

Key Issues

Sports psychologists face similar professional demands in areas such as continuing education and training. It is submitted that given the ceaseless commitment to athletic improvement, the development of new training techniques, nutritional and supplement approaches, physical monitoring, equipment trends and related factors places a substantial pressure on a sports psychologist to remain current in all aspects of their practice (Nesti, 2004).

At its best articulation, sport psychology has a transformational power that elevates performance (Armstrong, 2001, 4). Experiential learning cycles are often at the heart of successful sport psychology practice, because sport performance typically provides immediate feedback as to the efficacy of the cycles developed for the athlete. Sport psychology encourages an intensely personalized approach to all facets of its application; a significant relationship exists between the personality of the practitioner and the effectiveness of the applications; the simple observation that not every psychologist can succeed in this area due to the limitations of their own personality is reinforced here.

For even the most engaged and ‘cutting edge’ practitioners, there are practical considerations to the discipline that are submitted as both constants and as overarching issues that never decline in their importance. These are discussed here under the general rubric of *ethics*; as the examples below illustrate, the boundaries between professional competence, the duty of care to the athlete, continuing education concerning best practices, and the maintenance of appropriate ethical standards in all matters involving an athlete or team are not always clear cut.

It is important to appreciate that notwithstanding the unique demands of an individual sport or the immediacy that may be a part of the practitioner / athlete relationship, a psychologist remains bound by the statutory provisions and the ethical regulations of their jurisdiction. The various Codes of Conduct do not create separate regimes for the sports psychologist; the attention to the athlete relationship must be observed with the same care as patient relationships in clinical or therapeutic settings. It may be observed

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that in an elite sports team setting, where there is a large staff of professional sport persons that span a number of disciplines, only the team physician and the sport psychologist are liable to a standard of ethical conduct that extends beyond their contractual obligation to the team or the common law duties of care that might apply to a coach – athlete or trainer – athlete scenario (Nesti, 2004; Watson, 2008; Morris & Summers, 2004). Ethical codes may be clearer cut when the practitioner's relationship is with a adult professional golfer or well paid footballer; the youth and overall potential for vulnerable persons to be working with a sports psychologist render the standard ethical duties very important in practice.

One might conclude that given the acceptance of sport psychology as an important element of modern sport training and competition, that the more closely one could integrate physical and psychological, athletic training the more efficient the training over all and the more successful the athletic enterprise. Leaving aside the impossibility of installing combined coach / practitioners at every level of sport, a seeming next best option would be to ensure a close and centralised relationship between the athletic and psychological training programmes.

There are clear advantages to such a coordinated approach. The training time required for each aspect would be optimized; the psychological training could be seamlessly integrated into every segment of the physical training routines. The trust implicit in the athlete / coach relationship could assist the athlete in overcoming any apprehension about what to them may be novel or disconcerting mental training approaches (Wright & Erdal, 2008: 187).

The disadvantages are equally stark and it is submitted that the maintenance of practitioner and coaching boundaries is important in several potential areas of difficulty. Where the coach and the psychologist are working very closely together in a team sport environment, there is the concern that the athlete may be apprehensive about confiding in the psychologist or making a complete commitment to a psychological training programme for fear of any mental / emotional weakness being revealed to the coach and thus compromising playing time or status on the team (Watson & Clement, 2008, 3). The relationship between psychologist and athlete, like coach and athlete is inherently a *power* relationship; the knowledge that the practitioner applies to the psychological aspects of training create a dependency that must not be permitted to influence any other relationships that the athlete has. As Nesti notes (2004), the task facing the practitioner is to simultaneously maintain openness to the athletes and coaches without abandoning or diluting their most personal and deeply held values. This makes considerable demands upon the psychologist working in a sports environment "...where the dominant values are those centred on self-preservation and material gain."(102)

The ethics rubric takes on a further and more complex dimension when a team or sports organisation retains a sport psychologist to provide training. The ethical duties and their corresponding lines can become blurred. The following hypothetical will illustrate the issue. A sport psychologist is retained by a football team to help develop what the coach describes as "mental toughness" (Wann & Polk, 2007). The coach wants his players to be more aggressive, more truculent and more physical in their approach to the

game – “ I’m tired of our guys getting pushed around”. It may be readily appreciated that there is a thin almost indiscernible boundary between the coach’s “ toughness” and a training programme that may as easily promote rough, violent or anti-social attitudes amongst the players. The coach is determined to take newfound toughness instilled in the mental training regime to a new competitive level. The psychologist is now placed in a difficult position – to train as the club’s retainer requires, or to potentially assist in the promotion of emotional attitudes that are not necessarily in the individual athlete’s interest (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2006).

The sports psychologist has an important preventative / restorative role in all aspects of athletic training. ‘ Burnout’ is a psychological problem at every level of competitive sport, youth leagues to the professional ranks. (Kalliath & Beck, 2001; Matheson, Mathes & Murray, 1997) The same fundamental trust relationship between practitioner and athlete that build mental power in sport must also be applied where appropriate to protect – if an athlete is not emotionally suited to a particular type of training a practitioner has a positive ethical obligation to discontinue it, no matter who is paying for the services.

Future Directions in Sport Psychology

It is impossible to provide a definitive conclusion as to the future direction of sport psychology within the framework of this paper. However, two tentative propositions may be advanced. The first is a predicted even greater reliance by elite athletes on sport psychologists to provide them with support in training and competition. Every athlete in every sport seeks the proverbial edge, so often measured in millimeters or milliseconds. In an era of immense

potential financial returns for sport success, a sports psychologist is a cost-effective training aid.

The second prediction is connected to the development of the discipline itself. Competitive athletes are result driven; for society as a whole, there are fewer ways to empirically measure societal athletic or sport exercise success. The cost of health care as attributed to poor life style choices and sedentary attitudes may militate in favour of a public push to incorporate sports psychologists into the public health mainstream, on the same cost effectiveness rational as observed in elite sports.

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