Case Study

From the Track to the Classroom

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**From the track to the classroom: applying sport psychology to the academic environment**

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines sport psychology as the “*scientific study of the psychological factors that are associated with participation and performance in sport, exercise, and other types of physical activity.*” An eminent certifying body in sport psychology - the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) - states that their purpose is to “*promote the ethical practice, science, and advocacy of sport and exercise psychology”*. The importance of sport psychology has grown exponentially in recent years as a means of gaining a competitive advantage over rival athletes.

**The History of Sport Psychology**

The first scientific paper based on principles of sport psychology (a study of cyclists) was written by Dr. Norman Triplett in 1897 –However, it wasn’t until the 1920’s that the first sport psychology laboratory centre was established, as part of the state funded *Deutsche Hochschule für Leibesübungen*, a school dedicated to the study of the science of sport. Diem was actually a pivotal – and controversial - figure in the establishment of the Modern Olympic Games, responsible for far more in the world of sport than the establishment of the sports science school mentioned previously.

Most notably, Diem was responsible for the creation of the Olympic Torch Relay and Secretary General of the Organizing Committee of the Berlin Olympic Games. After the Berlin Olympic had taken place, Diem continued to hold senior posts in the Third Reich's sports organization (the NSRL), becoming the leader of the Foreign Department of the National Socialist Sports Office in 1939.

The US also developed its first sport psychology laboratory closely after, with the first undergraduate course in Sport Psychology being launched in 1923 in Illinois. Dr Griffith, the founder of both the centre and the undergraduate programme, also claimed the historic title as first ever sports psychologist to be hired by a professional sports team (the Chicago Cubs baseball team). Griffith is considered to be the father of sport psychology, at least in the United States, for his notable contributions.

**Modern Sport Psychology**

In the present day, it is considered *de rigeur* for sports teams (including Olympic, Paralympic and professional teams) to employ sport psychologists. Psychological skills are widely recognised in modern sport science as vital to the success of athletes at elite level.

In particular, the concept of *mental toughness* is considered central to success and the goal of sport psychology is to develop and maximise these skills in the athlete. Sport psychology can also help athletes to enhance their learning ability and motor skills, to cope with pressure, to maximise focus and awareness within training and competitive environments, and to manage competing demands in their life so that they can balance the demands of athletic training alongside the demands of family, work, and other commitments. Sport psychologists also play a significant role in supporting the emotional health of athletes. Psychological stress can cause a range of psychosomatic symptoms, such as insomnia/disturbed sleep, gastrointestinal distress, fatigue, mood swings, apathy, weight gain or loss, irritability, and muscle tension (the latter can also raise the potential for injury).

**How Students Can Use Sport Psychology to Maximise Academic Performance**

The goals of sport psychology are to maximise performance and potential. It could reasonably be theorised that students could also benefit from the techniques intended by athletes; after all, performance in the field of academia is also about maximising performance and potential, and (in a sense) gaining a competitive advantage over others in order to gain the highest scores in order to gain the greatest chance of an award, grant or scholarship. Many a student has demonstrated excellent scores in coursework and within a classroom environment, only to feel that their performance during an exam or presentation has been compromised due to feelings of stress, a lack of exam / presentation technique rehearsal, and so forth. This case study considers key foci of sports psychologists, and first explains how/why these principles are used for athletes, before considering how they might also be used by students in an academic environment.

**Key Foci of Sport Psychologists**

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*Preparation for Competition*

Sport psychologists play an important role in the preparation for competition. The sport psychologist teaches the athlete to utilise **relaxation skills,** such as breathing techniques, autogenic training, mastering attentional styles, positive imagery, positive self-talk and development of a pre-competition mental routine that can be employed immediately prior to competition.

Athletes are also encouraged to identify their personal responses to stress, and to be very specific in terms of recording how that stress affects them on game day itself. Psychosomatic stress can take many forms, identified earlier, such as rapid breathing, sweaty palms, an upset stomach, tight shoulders, the need to be around familiar people, the need to be alone, the need for reassurance, loss of focus and short term memory loss.

Students would benefit from observing these principles, and taking time to develop their ‘pre-game’ (pre-exam or pre-presentation) strategy. This strategy might involve, for example, drowning out the sounds of other nervous students by playing calming music on headphones, taking time alone in the minutes preceding the exam/presentation, always having water on hand in case of a dry mouth, basic stretching exercises to promote feelings of relaxation, the use of a brisk walk to manage the side-effects of surges in adrenaline, visualisation of how one might cope calmly with feelings of memory loss within the exam or presentation, ensuring that blood sugar is regulated by eating at an appropriate time before the presentation, and regulation of caffeine intake. Taking time to really focus on the identification of triggers would benefit some students greatly.

*Coping with Injury*

Psychologists also play a vital part in helping the athlete to cope with injury. The effects of injury on an athletic career can be devastating to an athlete, even if they are not permanent, and the athlete may suffer psychologically debilitating side-effects such as stress, depression, and a compromised ability to self-identify as an athlete. The athlete might, as a result of injury, be temporarily or permanently removed from their regular environment, isolated from players, coaches, the gym and the training ground – in short – every part of the life that they have made central to their self-identity, goals and lifestyle. The most common psychological response experienced by an injured athlete are *isolation, frustration* and *disturbances of mood*.

Effective sports psychology interventions have facilitated the return of many athletes to the competitive field stronger and better as a result of the work that they have undergone in the development of their mental skills. Triggers for the referral of injured athletes usually include; lack of confidence in their ability to recover, the inability to filter out environmental distractions during training or competition, a lack of belief that injuries will heal, a loss of focus, fixating on thoughts of the injury, a tendency for negative self-talk, and a wish to move quickly to more intense rehabilitation with an intense focus on the need to improve their mental game (i.e. to improve their mental toughness, focus, confidence, concentration, ability to cope with

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pressure, etc).

The reason why this intervention can be useful for a student is because athletic and academic environments both require the elicitation of peak performance and the maximisation of the full potential of the individual.

Elite athletes tend to possess Type A tendencies, and as high performers tend to be highly self-critical, to maintain higher than average standards, and are potentially more at risk of burnout as a result. Such a personality can be as prevalent in academic high achievers as it is in elite athletes, so it could be theorised that the same interventions hold value for both groups. One might draw the analogy that the injury of an athlete (and subsequent withdrawal from training and competition) could be compared to the failure of a student to pass an exam, or to fail to secure a scholarship or award. In more extreme cases, achieving even a B instead of an A can prove detrimental to the self-confidence and self-identity of the student. This is where the central concept of mental toughness emerges as a driving factor in performance. Students and athletes need to learn to cultivate the mental strength to accept failure, learn from it, and use it to motivate themselves to achieve higher levels of success. It takes time to learn to self-coach oneself to cope with setbacks in such a positive way but the skill is vital in securing emotional health and future success

.*Developing Coping Techniques*

The ability to self-coach is vital, in order to rebound from failure, to develop self-confidence, and to maximise one’s potential. Sport psychologists and coaches focus on the development of this ability in their athletes in order that they can effectively cope with stress, through the development of coping strategies.

This involves conceptualising one’s own stress profile, in order to understand the specific triggers that lead to stress for each individual, in a particular performance-based scenario (such as running the 100m, or delivering an assessed presentation). By identifying these triggers, we can then devise strategies for coping with the psychosomatic side-effects that occur (for example, shaking, dry mouth, lack of memory or concentration, panic). The athlete (and, in this case study, student) is encouraged to employ mental rehearsal techniques in the hours before the competitive event, so that they can prepare themselves mentally and minimise stress. Another coping strategy would be to adopt a practiced pre-performance routine that minimises the negative stress response of the individual In an exam scenario, this might include arriving early to the examination venue, use od breathing techniques, and visualisation of how to cope with difficult questions.

**Summary**

In summary, students would do well to prepare for exams, presentations & other assessed situations by developing coping strategies and pre-assessment routines that are designed to minimise stress and maximise performance. Eliciting peak performance on the track or in the classroom is not only a result of genetic ability but also of the ability to develop the mental toughness to cope with stressors in order to maximise performance under pressure. Thus, the attribution of sport psychology principles to academic might prove a positive means of advancing performance in the classroom as efficiently as it helps to achieve excellence on the track.

**Further Information**

**IAAF Guide to Sport Psychology**

http://www.iaaf.org/mm/Document/imported/42036.pdf

**British Psychological Society: Becoming a Sport & Exercise Psychologist**

http://www.bps.org.uk/careers-education-training/how-become-psychologist/types-psychologists/becoming-sport-exercise-psych

**Discussion**

* Do you agree that principles of sport psychology are transferable to the classroom?
* Defend your answer to the previous question with reference to the similarities & differences between both environments that might inhibit or facilitate such transference.

Identify scenarios where you might use any of the principles outlined in this case study in

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* non-sporting areas of your life, to improve your performance and emotional health.

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