It’s not just cricket

As the 2015 Ashes series comes to England, Jamie Barker and Matt Slater consider the psychology at play

Cricket is a sport that brings with it many psychological challenges and demands that players must deal with to be successful. As the 2015 Ashes series is almost with us, what are the main psychological factors that players are likely to encounter? And what psychological techniques are there available to sport and exercise psychologists to promote effective player thinking, behaviour, and performance?

As you tune into this summer’s Ashes series, perhaps this article will give you a greater consideration of the psychology behind one of sport’s greatest contests.

What are the main psychological factors cricketers are likely to face?
What are the most effective psychological techniques cricketers can draw upon?
How do sport and exercise psychologists determine the mental health of cricketers?


I think ability is a 10 to 20 per cent requirement, you need 80 to 90 per cent mental strength.

Glenn McGrath, former Australian cricketer

Crickets are a game that obviously requires talent, but when talent is equal, as it so often is, the formula for success comes from strength of mind.

Steve Waugh, former Australian captain

Self-efficacy (confidence)

When you have it (confidence) you feel like you’re never going to lose it, when you haven’t got it, you feel like you’re never going to get it.

Matthew Hayden, former Australian cricketer

Due to the many uncontrollable factors in cricket (e.g. playing conditions, umpiring decisions) and the fact that statistically cricketers fail more times than they succeed, the ability for cricketers to regulate and maintain self-efficacy is crucial for success (Bull et al., 2005). When out in the middle, a batsman’s efficacy can change from situation to situation as they are faced with different bowlers, playing conditions and match situations. It is important players have an awareness of how self-efficacy is influenced, and their most important sources of self-efficacy information. They must develop strategies to regulate self-efficacy throughout a game, test series, and season.

Empirically, data indicate self-efficacy to be a strong and consistent predictor of individual athletic performance (e.g. Kane et al., 1996; Treasure et al., 1996). Self-efficacy levels are proposed to impact sport performance by determining levels

of motivation that will be reflected in the challenges individuals undertake, the effort they expend, and their levels of perseverance (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy judgements have also been shown to influence certain thought patterns (e.g. goal intentions, worries, causal attributions) and emotional reactions (e.g. pride, shame, happiness, stress) that influence motivation. Typically, people exhibiting high self-efficacy work harder, persist in the task longer and achieve at a higher level over and above those who doubt their own capabilities. Because self-efficacy is important for success, a variety of psychological strategies (i.e. modelling, feedback, imagery, self-talk and hypnosis) have been used by sport psychologists to engender athletes’ regulation of self-efficacy levels (Short & Ross-Stewart, 2009). Typically, these strategies are suggested to be effective by influencing one or more sources of self-efficacy information (as outlined in Bandura’s taxonomy), which in turn influence expectations and then behaviour. To illustrate, observing competent models successfully perform actions, or the self-modelling of actions, influences self-efficacy by conveying information about the sequence of actions one should use to succeed (e.g. Bandura, 1997; Clark & Stoeber, 2007). Self-modelling in cricket may involve a player recording their own performance (either in practice or competition) as they successfully complete a series of cricket tasks or skills (e.g. playing a particular shot or taking a catch in the slips). The player subsequently views the recording as part of their preparation for games to boost their efficacy by providing key past experience and modelling experiences information (see Barker & Jones, 2006).

Before the Trent Bridge Test, he had 10 days without an innings in the middle, so he spent an hour watching his big score at Lord’s ‘to get the blood flowing, and rekindle good memories’. In the bus back from the ground to hotel at the close of play, the whole squad watched a video of personal highlights during the day’s play. Smith thinks this works well,
Research has also examined the impact of feedback on self-efficacy. For example, Escarti and Guzman (1999) used manipulated feedback and estimates of self-efficacy relative to an athletic task, finding that performance feedback was significantly related to increased self-efficacy, performance and task choice. Self-efficacy can also be maintained via images and imagery of successful performance (e.g. Jones et al., 2002). To illustrate, players may use imagery prior to batting, following the call from the captain to loosen up prior to a bowling spell, or in the days leading up to an important game.

Further, research has outlined the positive contribution made by self-talk on efficacy expectations (Hanton & Jones, 1999). For example, in a sample of elite swimmers, self-talk altered perceptions of anxiety responses, increased levels of self-efficacy, and improved performance (Hanton & Jones, 1999). When used properly, positive self-talk can direct attention to task relevant cues (i.e. ‘watch the ball’), raise efficacy and prevent the possible debilitating consequences of self-doubt (often due to negative self-talk).

Finally, we have recently explored the use of hypnosis, including the use of ego-strengthening suggestions (Harland, 1971) to facilitate self-efficacy beliefs in athletes. The concept of ‘ego-strengthening’ involves helping participants to enhance feelings of self-efficacy, self-worth and to minimise anxiety and worrying. The essence of this approach is to repeat suggestions of confidence and belief over and over so that the suggestions take hold in the person’s subconscious mind and exert an automatic influence on feelings, thoughts and behaviour (Hammond, 1990). Across a series of studies using both idiographic and nomothetic designs we have demonstrated substantial increases in athletes’ self-efficacy and performance (see Barker & Jones, 2006, 2008, Barker et al., 2010).

In relation to cricket, we explored the effects of a multi-model intervention on the self-efficacy of a male cricket leg-spin bowler (Barker & Jones, 2006). The intervention comprised:

- hypnosis and self-hypnosis procedures (10 hypnosis sessions were delivered including cricket-specific ego-strengthening suggestions and self-hypnosis; a pre-performance routine was developed for the cricketer to use the night before, and on the morning before each match);
- refinement of the bowler’s technique, focusing on the run-up, head position and follow-through; and
- self-modelling through the use of an edited highlights reel.

Overall, the results revealed a substantial difference between pre- and post-progression in self-efficacy levels, with this positive change being maintained in the long-term follow-up data. Importantly, bowling performance also improved across the post-intervention phases. We should note that the use of hypnosis in cricket is not a recent occurrence. Former England fast bowler Bob Willis once remarked: ‘I’d played one of the self-hypnosis tapes to myself and was in the optimum state of readiness’ (prior to taking 8 for 43 against Australia in the Headingly Test in 1981). Interestingly Sir Ian Botham once claimed, as a dismissal of sport psychology, that it ‘did not help Bob Willis take “8 for” at Headingly’.

Concentration

The key to concentration is filling your mind with what you need to do to ensure a successful action, for me to bat there must be nothing but the ball in my mind, this occupies my thoughts before every shot.

Justin Langer, former Australian cricketer

Given the start-stop nature of cricket, the potentially long durations involved, and the many internal and external distractions (e.g. player self-talk, scoreboard, spectators, the opposition), cricketers need to be proficient in regulating their concentration to be successful (Bull et al., 2005). The current England test captain Alastair Cook has reflected many times in the media that his ability to bat for prolonged periods of time (and deal with distractions) is...
mainly due to his experiences of belonging to a school choir from an early age, which required him to spend long hours rehearsing and focusing on the words and chords.

One of the notorious aspects of the Ashes is the ‘sledging’ that will go on between players, aimed at provoking a poor decision or a loss of emotional control. In the 2013/14 Ashes series the Australian captain Michael Clarke was heard on the stump microphone saying to James Anderson (an England bowler) between deliveries ‘get ready for a broken fucking arm’, in an attempt to unsettle the player. To maintain concentration in the face of this, watch out for players using pre-performance routines (Cotterill, 2010) before each delivery: the batter checking their gloves or tapping their bat at the crease, the bowler spinning the ball from one hand to another, or always turning the same way at the end of their run up, the wicketkeeper checking their gloves in a specific order before then crouching. Routines offer a natural ‘trigger’ to either begin focusing, or to refocus (recognising as humans we cannot focus with the same intensity all of the time). The individual components of the routine are actually not that important, although it does help if these components relate to what a player is about to do (execute their skills). At the same time we need to remember that we do not want players to be having technical thoughts, as this will ultimately stop efficient skill execution and encourage possible choking responses (e.g. paralysis by analysis; see Beilock, 2011). The ideal approach would be to develop consistent thoughts that link with the behaviours that already exist as part of a players preparations. So it could be that a very simple mental routine would involve saying ‘stand, balance, prepare, watch the ball’ (Cotterill, 2011).

Emotional control

It’s a mix of high skill levels and being clear mentally, strong minded. With the noise and pressure it’s about how you control your emotions.

Ashley Giles, former England cricketer

...if someone says something, you want to reply, but you realise he is trying to get importance out of picking a fight with you. So then I think, I look and I move. Normally we react emotionally, so I try to keep my emotions in check. I can’t do it every time. This is something I have changed about myself, because in the past I would always react. Then I figured that not saying anything can sometimes be more powerful than talking.

Yuvraj Singh, former Indian cricketer

In the sport of cricket players and coaches sign up to experience a vast spectrum of feelings, from the abundance of joy and happiness gleaned from an important match victory, through the terrorising anxiety when preparing for a cup final, to disappointment and dejection following a defeat. To optimise performance it is crucial for players to make the most effective use of their emotions.

Alastair Cook provides an interesting example here. Coupled with incredible focus is the England captain’s impressive consistency and apparent stability of his emotions when he bats. To illustrate, after Cook led England to victory against India in December 2012, teammate Graham Onions commented how Cook is not a man to show a lot of emotion. A consistent emotional state (e.g. remaining relaxed when he plays and misses), is likely to play a large part in Alastair Cook’s consistent performances. Its important for players to enjoy the highs of cricket (e.g. scoring a century) and draw confidence from these successes, but of parallel importance is letting mistakes or adverse situations pass without influencing how players feel (Cotterill & Barker, 2013). Indeed, research has asserted the importance of emotional regulation for sport performance (see Uphill et al., 2009).

Being able to regulate expectations, the irrational beliefs and subsequent emotions players experience has been the core of our recent research in sport using rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT) (Turner & Barker, 2013a; Turner et al., 2014). For example, we examined the efficacy of REBT (comprising three counselling sessions and two homework assignments) in decreasing irrational beliefs and cognitive-anxiety in four elite youth cricketers (Turner & Barker, 2013a). Visual and statistical analyses indicated that the REBT intervention reduced irrational belief and cognitive-anxiety in all four. Moreover, social validation data from the players, parents, and the coach further supported the quantitative data in that players were less anxious, had greater emotional control, and had a more effective perspective about the game of cricket.

The mood and emotions at a team level also affect cricket performance. To illustrate ‘emotional contagion’ in cricket, data were collected from players across two professional teams using pocket computers to provide ratings of their moods and performances three times a day for four days during a competitive match between the teams (Totterdell, 2000). Analysis revealed significant associations between the average of teammates’ happy moods and the players’ own moods and performances. Moreover, mood linkage was greater for players who were older, more committed to the team, and more susceptible to emotional contagion. These data imply that the
moods players display in the inner sanctum of a cricket pavilion can have a substantial effect on performance. Therefore, coaches, players and sport psychologists may consider developing an open and honest team environment where players are encouraged to share personal stories about success, confidence and values in order to foster positive emotional responses and enhance resilience (Barker et al., 2014; Turner & Barker, 2013b).

Leadership – the cricket captain
A captain must make every decision before he knows what its effect will be, and he must carry the full responsibility, not whether his decision will be right or wrong, but whether it brings success. Don Bradman, former Australian cricketer

The role of the captain in cricket is one that carries many challenges in comparison to other sports. Captains are involved in selection, making decisions on the order of play (e.g. whether to bat first following the toss, the batting order), and determining the strategy and tactics of the team including field settings and bowling changes. To achieve all of these requirements the captain needs to be an effective leader, able to manage all the different characters and personalities that make up their team and handle the media to boot. The captain also needs to be able to inspire the team to follow them, and in many cases look to lead from the front (Brearley, 2001; Cotterill & Barker, 2013). Individuals that emerge as effective leaders may be those that create a strong team identity (see Slater et al., 2014). In other words, the success of both captains in the forthcoming Ashes series may be influenced by the creation of a distinct, unique and connected cricket team with players who rather than thinking ‘I’ and ‘me’, think ‘we’ and ‘us’.

While taking care of the many team issues, the captain must also look to maintain their own preparation and performance standards. When the captain is a top-order batsman, as may well be the case in the coming Ashes series, it is common for opposition bowlers to target them early on in a series in an attempt to reduce their personal batting confidence but also the confidence of the team. Little wonder, then, that anecdotal reports in the media indicate that taking on the captain role can have both positive and negative effects on maintaining personal performance standards – some thrive under the pressure, whilst others suffer, due partly to increasing associated roles and responsibility (Cotterill & Barker, 2013).

Success may come at a price
I considered hurting myself just to show people how much pain I was in. If you’ve got a broken leg you’ve got a cast on your leg, people can see you’ve got a problem but when you’ve got mental problems there is nothing evident to people to show you need help. Marcus Trescothick, former England cricketer

Along with the typical performance-related psychological factors that are likely to be prevalent during the Ashes, more recently a series of high-profile individuals within cricket have reported mental health issues, including depression and burnout. Athletic burnout has been reported in the sport psychology literature to be related to athlete maladaptive perfectionistic beliefs and coach-created ego-oriented performance climates (e.g. Hill et al., 2008). Being an international cricketer may initially seem like a dream job for most – travelling the world and playing a sport one loves – but for some it can become the stuff of nightmares.

Many players describe the challenges of life as internationals to include: the constant feelings of guilt from balancing forging a professional career with family commitments; the stress of being away from home for prolonged periods of time; the burden of fulfilling media and sponsor obligations; and the increasing pressures to maintain performance standards. Indeed, a number of years ago Stuart Broad (a current England player) recalled in the media how he wouldn’t be seeing his home again for close to six months due to his training and playing commitments for England that particular winter and that living out of a suitcase wasn’t all it was cracked up to be! We also know that from recent anecdotal accounts that the life of an international cricketer can be very different to the ‘bed of roses’ that is often portrayed in the media and by ex-players, and that playing at the highest level becomes too much for some.

For example, Marcus Trescothick and Michael Yardy both suffered severe depression, forcing Trescothick to retire from international cricket and Yardy to return home from the 2011 Cricket World Cup in India. More recently, Jonathan Trott infamously returned from the 2013/14 Ashes series in Australia, allegedly suffering from a ‘stress-related illness’ he later described as burnout. Alarmingly, cricket has also been posited as a sport with one of the highest suicide rates (Frith, 2011).

Why should this be the case? Possible reasons include the long periods of time spent away from home, with some players spending as much as half the year away on tour, and a lot of regular idle time spent in between games. Further, the numerous extraneous variables (e.g. weather, pitch conditions, umpiring decisions) can render players powerless in determining their own success (Muller, 2013; see also the column from former professional cricketer turned sport psychologist Alastair Storrie in this publication: tinyurl.com/khpoeq).

Summary
The game of cricket – and in particular the Ashes – offers many mental challenges for players. Sport psychology is therefore recognised as an integral part of a players’ development to optimise performance along with establishing positive mental health. The 2015 Ashes series will undoubtedly provide many on-field psychological head-to-head confrontations and turning points. As sport psychologists we look forward to watching, and we hope we have convinced some of you that there is more to this game than meets the eye.

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