

'There's an art to sport psychology, never a fixed answer'

Ian Florance interviewed Hannah Newman, whose PhD examines the 'idea of female strength and power... by looking at female strength athletics or strongwoman events'.

Hannah's combination of interests – including LGBT+ rights, what legal gender means in a demographically diverse society, the role of sports in society – touches on many current issues where psychologists may have a key role.

Can you tell me about your background and how your sporting interests developed?

I grew up in Chingford, North East London, the same place as David Beckham and Harry Kane. I go back to my primary school, Normanhurst, once a year to talk about sports psychology at their annual Careers Day.

My first involvement with organised sport came when I was ten. My dad works as a cricket writer, and he took me along to an interview he was doing with then England cricketer Nasser Hussain. It was being held at Nasser's dad's cricket school in Ilford. Joe Hussain asked me if I played cricket; I said 'in the garden'; he replied 'we have a girls team that play here every weekend, why don't you come along on Saturday?' Three days later I was thrown into my first competitive indoor cricket game, and I spent the next 15 years playing club cricket. I ended up with Wanstead, where my under-11 age group grew into the club's first women's team to play league cricket... I spent a couple of years as Vice Captain, and then became Captain. I played my last game for Wanstead in 2017, though I'm still a member.

In 2013 I completed my level two cricket coaching qualification. Essex County Cricket Board then hired myself and Saba Nasim (Wanstead Women's current Captain) to set up, launch and run the East London Girls Project (now called Chance to Shine Street) to encourage girls' participation in cricket. I co-ran this with Saba until I relocated to Loughborough in late 2014. The project is still going strong, with Saba running it.

My cricket career began to come to an end when I started competing in novice strongwoman competitions in 2014. My interest and involvement

continued to grow, culminating in competing in England's Strongest Woman in 2017, which was held at Bloodstock Open Air Festival... it was a great experience.

And how did you get interested in psychology?

I began my undergraduate degree in sport and exercise science at Middlesex knowing that I wanted to work in sport, but with no specific idea of where. The psychology modules appealed most. By the end of my second year I wanted to pursue sport psychology. In order to give me the future option of becoming a British Psychological Society accredited sport psychologist I stayed at Middlesex to do a psychology conversion Masters, as I didn't have enough psychology credits from my undergraduate course. Then I went on to do a second Masters in sport psychology at Loughborough.

I had very little, if any, prior knowledge of the subject. My first thoughts were about how I could apply its principles to my cricket; strategies to help with things I had always struggled with when I went out to bat, such as performance anxiety and fear of failure. When I started my psychology conversion Masters, I was further surprised by the range that a



Hannah Newman

Might you have an interesting story to tell about your career path, the highs and lows of your current role or the professional challenges you are facing? **If you would like to write about it for *The Psychologist***, get in touch with the editor Dr Jon Sutton (jon.sutton@bps.org.uk). Of course there are many other ways to contribute to *The Psychologist*, but this is one that many find to be particularly quick, easy and enjoyable.

psychology degree covers – for example developmental psychology and, in particular, infant development. But I am glad that I did a sport science degree first: that path has equipped me well from both a psychology and a sport-specific perspective. For instance, when working in interdisciplinary teams, it feels important that I have a basic understanding of other disciplines, such as strength and conditioning, physiology and biomechanics, and how they work together.

So sports psychologists need to look to other areas for ideas?

Sport psychology has expanded beyond the mental skills training that makes up its core, most traditional form. It has begun to incorporate many different approaches and techniques from other psychology disciplines. One great example of this is Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT): there has been a significant body of recent research on this and how it can be applied to performance anxiety and athletes' irrational beliefs. Conversely, principles from sport psychology have transferred into other performance-related areas: some sport psychologists also work successfully in businesses. As the discipline continues to grow... I think this cross-fertilisation between disciplines will continue to increase.

What are the big issues facing the area?

Athlete mental health has been a high-profile topic for a few years now, and until recently there was very little existing research on this. Research efforts are increasing as mental health awareness is developing within and outside sport.

Performance enhancement and athlete wellbeing do not always easily align. It can be tricky to balance psychologists' service to their employer, which is often a sports club, organisation or governing body, and their service to their client, the athlete. For example, if the employer brief is to 'increase performance' but this affects the athlete's wellbeing, there can be some conflict of interest. For me this is a crucial issue for sport psychology. Greater clarity on their role in balancing these two areas and their responsibilities to both the athlete and the sporting body is required.

Do different sports require different approaches?

Yes! One of the most obvious examples is the difference between team and individual sports. In individual sports there is often a lot more scope to produce strategies and routines for an athlete that they can repeat without change each time they compete. In team sports this is not always so easy as each individual athlete needs to consider how their own strategies can be integrated into things such as pre-match team preparation and routines. For example, an athlete may plan to have some quiet time an hour



before a match, but this may be when the coach wants the team to start warming up. The underpinning principles of sport psychology will transfer between sports, but which principles are used and how they are applied will differ.

You are a strong advocate of LGBT+ rights. Can you describe some of your activities here?

I'm currently the Vice Chair of Loughborough Students' LGBT+ Association, having been on the committee for three years. Our work involves providing a safe social space for LGBT+ students at Loughborough, but also to work towards changes on campus that make it a more inclusive space for LGBT+ students, staff, and visitors. Many of the initiatives I have worked on concern trans inclusivity: gender neutral toilet and changing facilities, the removal of titles from student ID cards, and processes for the reporting of hate crime on campus.

Trans and non-binary inclusion in sport is an important topic of discussion. Ongoing research at Loughborough will inform future policies and practices. We are also working alongside Loughborough Sport to increase sporting opportunities and reduce barriers to participation for trans and non-binary students.

There have been some positives to the recent media coverage of diverse gender identities. Arguably awareness of transgender experiences is higher than it has ever been, but I feel that the majority of this coverage, particularly in the mainstream press, has been misinformed and has caused further problems regarding acceptance and understanding. There is more work to do in correcting misconceptions that others may have picked up from the media. Negative portrayals of transgender people can have

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serious psychological implications, particularly for younger trans people who may feel that they can't come out for fear of rejection, or who may internalise these perspectives, resulting in self-loathing and unacceptance of themselves.

You comment that 'as a non-binary transgender person, I have encountered challenges regarding the lack of recognition of my identity, and my inclusion in sport'.

My sporting participation has become more complicated since I committed to my transition and living more authentically as myself. It's not so clear-cut what categories I should or should not be competing in, and I've now distanced myself from competing in women's sport. My challenge at the moment is that neither men's or women's sport feels quite right for me, but other competitive options are extremely limited. Currently I'm sticking to strength sports where I have more options, for example, the LGBT Powerlifting Championships. I also organised a competition last year at my strongman gym, Grindhouse Strongman in Burton-Upon-Trent, called Limitless, where categories were divided by ability as opposed to gender, and that we'll start to see more inclusive opportunities.

My experiences in academia have been overwhelmingly positive. I came out mid-PhD. Working in the School of Social Sciences at Loughborough I could not have had a better experience and there has been very little challenge. I am not confident, though, that this is the same for all trans academics at all institutions. Although awareness and acceptance is increasing, unfortunately there is still a strong anti-trans voice in the UK. LGBT+ awareness should be a part of all psychologist training, not restricted to clinical and counselling psychologists. Sport psychologists have the potential to play a very important role for LGBT+ athletes, and so they should at least have a basic knowledge that enables them to react appropriately if an athlete confides in them, and to best support those athletes or refer them to further help and support.

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Can you tell me about the challenges and opportunities you've faced in strength sports for women?

My PhD research in this area has produced some really interesting findings regarding women's participation in a traditionally 'masculine' sport, and the implications this has for identity and body image. Many of the women in my research found their way into the sport as part of a weight loss journey. As their involvement in the sport continued, they described an internal conflict between their new-found desire to get stronger, and the need to eat more to build muscle and strength, with a fear of 'eating too much' and worrying about how this may conflict with their original goals. In terms of reward though, many of the strongwomen said that focusing on the number of weights they could lift, as opposed to the number on the scales, provided a sense of liberation and empowerment, and there appeared to be psychological benefits experienced from focusing on ability as opposed to aesthetics.

If you met someone who wanted to study sports psychology what would you say to them?

Firstly I'd say that the path to becoming a fully qualified, accredited sport psychologist is quite a long and often expensive one. They should be aware of and prepared for this. They should also keep track of developments in the two qualification pathways: the BPS and the BASES (British Association of Sport and Exercise Science) routes. A lot of work is being done developing these pathways and their relationship, so it's important to keep up to date before committing to certain courses or qualifications.

Be prepared for the fact that there's an art to sport psychology, there's never a fixed answer. Each athlete is an individual, and what works for one won't necessarily work for another. It's important to be flexible, adaptable, and sometimes creative in your approach, and in your development of specific interventions and strategies. There is no 'one size fits all' approach.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years' time?

Fingers crossed I'll have submitted my PhD by the end of this year! My goal is very much to stay in academia, I love research. The next step will hopefully be a postdoctoral research position. At the moment I've put the final stages of my applied accreditation on hold as I'm already juggling a PhD and a Research Associate position, but this is something I plan to revisit in the future. In ten years' time I see myself working as a full-time academic, but I'd like to incorporate some form of applied work and private practice as an aside to this.