Running the world-class programme in athletics

Dave Collins, Performance Director at UK Athletics, on how he will be putting his background in psychology to use in pursuit of medals this month

Rarely off the back pages and now with its own Division of the British Psychological Society, sport psychology has come of age. Even though some, more 'conservative', individuals or sports may shy away from it, sport psychology (with or without actual sport psychologists) is acknowledged as a key part of preparation and performance.

Despite this acceptance, many in athletics were surprised to see 'one of them' taking on the lead role, when I left my post at the University of Edinburgh for the job of Performance Director at UK Athletics. Indeed, one commentator observed (using one of Churchill's many aphorisms), that 'scientists should be on the team, but never on top'!

I can completely understand such questioning; even though personally I feel that the role of Performance Director (as opposed to, say, Head Coach) draws more heavily on psychology than on the technical principles of that particular sport. In this article I would like to explore some aspects of that role, and tease out the contribution of psychology to a job that carries the constant pressure to produce common to football management (but not, I hasten to add, the salary to match).

Management and leadership structures

As Performance Director, my particular focus is on the World Class Performance Plan (WCPP), which has the clear aim of achieving medals at World and Olympic level. However, like many such programmes in other sports, we are also part of a National Governing Body, in this case UK Athletics, which has other broader aims such as participation or marketing. Our challenge is to be effective within this structure, whilst supporting the goals of the other units. Psychology can play an important part here as well, offering the chance to match outcome measures of unit performance (contrast the potentially conflicting Key Performance Indicators of media, marketing and WCPP for example) with more process-focused outcome measures.

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Surprisingly, perhaps, there is some debate in the literature on whether performance measures aid or hinder actual performance (Franco & Bourne, 2004; Schneiderman, 1999), with the authors concluding that ever tighter measures coincide with decreased impact! This finding stands in direct contrast to the mantra of sport performance management: Control (all) the controllables. Certainly, some of the methods we use, described later in this article, provide ample exemplars for the anal attention to detail that typifies achievement in such environments.

In our WCPP, we solve this apparent dichotomy by using a variety of measures, both process and outcome, interactively (cf. Simons, 1991) to monitor and drive performance. The use of measures in this way offers another crucial opportunity to monitor and improve progress throughout the life of a support plan, without sole dependence on the medals that are the public's (and hence the media's) only KPI (cf. Bourne et al., 2005).

The other feature worthy of mention in the development of UKA's WCPP is the role and application of leadership. I have used the 'Forming-Storming-Norming-Performing' progression (originally proposed in 1965 by Bruce Tuckman) to characterise and aid team development. This process takes place when new management systems, structures and individuals enter the environment.

The original, comparatively unstructured nature of athletics as a sport, with small but unrelated subgroups of support athletes and professionals built around a coach, is also worth mentioning. In simple terms, in contrast to starting work with a team sport or even an established programme, my entry into athletics revealed what could perhaps best be described as a 'loose' structure. Application of leadership principles focused on 'coalescing' this structure (Sheard & Kakabadse, 2002) was an early priority. Over the last year, we have worked hard to build tighter-knit support teams working from a single base and interacting with three or more full-time professional coaches plus others. This model is now expressed as four 'High Performance Athletics Centres' or HiPACs, underpinned by other smaller support systems to offer a geographical spread. Each, working under its own HiPAC Director, has two strength and conditioning specialists, two or more physiotherapists, a sport psychologist, nutritionist, biomechanist, doctor and masseurs. Plus a few athletes of course!

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Optimising the work programmes of this lot requires more than a little psychology. Accordingly, we use a wide variety of management tools and a healthy dollop of leadership and communication. Finally, of course, all of them must come together at least once a year and perform at the major championships of the season; this year, a small event in Beijing.

The nature of athletics as, perhaps, the ultimate individual sport means that this will never be a team in the football or rugby sense (although the relays start to get close to it). Team identity and a mutually supportive climate can help individual performance enormously however, so efforts in this direction are also important. The team spirit and personal accountability apparent in the team now are evidence that this process seems to be working!

'Proper' sport psychology

Of course, and unsurprisingly given my background, we also spend a deal of effort on more conventional sport psychology… basically trying to ensure that the well-learned and oft-practised movements in training are translated or even surpassed in the heat of competition. Once again, however, experience in elite sport has suggested that optimum performance-focused psychology requires some adjustment in emphasis. Although some papers have considered the characteristics of, or structures underpinning, skilled motor behaviour (e.g. Sparrow et al., 1999), a significant percentage of sport psychology research to date has focused on reducing the effects of 'unwanted' cognitions and emotions. Typically studies have considered the effects of anxiety (Beilock & Carr, 2001; Masters, 1992) and its associated cognitions on performance in sport. In contrast, understanding aspects of movement generation does not appear to have been a primary concern for applied practitioners.

From a sports performance perspective, at least in closed-skill sports like athletics, this emphasis seems curious given that accurate and consistent movement is fundamental to optimal task execution. In simple terms, why do (some) sport psychologists spend so much time looking at controlling emotions that impact on performance by disrupting movement control? We are currently trying to 'cut out the middle man' by placing a greater emphasis on mental cues that promote the consistent execution of an optimised movement pattern (MacPherson et al., in press).

In fact, more consistent movement patterns and getting back in the groove more quickly after disruption are both important markers of expertise (Cordier et al., 1996), and promoting this strikes an immediate chord with most coaches. So psychology plays a big part in the coaching process, albeit a more motor-strip dominated style than the frontal lobe emotional stuff that predominates elsewhere.

Of course, we don't entirely ignore emotions! Indeed, many top athletes focus on 'getting into character' before performance with intensity reminiscent of Meatloaf (OK, that dates me!). Positive emotions are immensely powerful in generating peak performances (Csíkszentmihályi, 1992) but the generation of such states is a concern for the whole support team, not just the 'psychos'.

Supporting individuals – Interdisciplinary sport science

There are many people involved in producing a medal-winning performance, even though once the day arrives 'they also serve who stand and wait'. The simple message is that peak performances are about what an athlete does every day for years, not just on the day of the competition. This is well represented by the old adage on planning, 'P7' – Perfect Prior Preparation Prevents Piss Poor Performance.

Accordingly, another big psychological concern is the balanced management of the (hopefully) creative tensions that arise from a team of specialists. Yet again, management is crucial for many reasons – not least because all the members of the team are so keen to help that the athlete can almost drown in a sea of inconsistent support.

In UK Athletics we maximise the benefits *and* avoid drowning through the use of an interdisciplinary support structure. Specialists work in various combinations to bring the full weight of their expertise to bear at any one time on the issue at hand. This sounds great, but it does take time and concerted effort if it is to work optimally. The person responsible for coordinating and managing the support has a number of functions to perform. The athlete needs to know exactly what is happening in all of the areas at a long-term, intermediate and day-to-day level. In most performance environments this is best achieved by use of another specialist, the Performance Manager (PM), whose training and oversight keeps things in balance. In a sports setting the PM can make sure that things are working well, leaving the coach to focus on the technical development and preparation of the performer.

The most important function that the PM can serve is to maintain and ensure good communication between all members of the team. In an ideal world, support specialists communicate freely and often about issues that have been identified by the coach/athlete pair. Individual specialists or subsets of the full team address previously identified specific issues with the coach/athlete client, keeping the PM informed. Useful tools for the PM process include full team 'case conferences' at which all can discuss a particular project (e.g. increasing power) or issue (e.g. injury rehabilitation). As a result, members of the support team are all focused on the performance benefit which each component of the plan can bring to the party. This shared mental model means that all are kept on track by both line management *and* peer pressure from the team. Optimising this process draws heavily on psychological principles, and is yet another example of the central role that the mental science plays in this very physical world.

I hope this brief overview of a performance team in action has shown that psychology is alive and well in athletics. I also hope that the positive benefits will translate into medals in Beijing, or I might be back in the world of psychology rather quicker than I bargained for!

CREDIT

Dave Collins
Performance Director, UK Athletics
dcollins@ukathletics.org.uk