

# Swifter, higher, stronger

## The history of sport psychology

As the latest Olympics gets under way, John Kremer and Aidan Moran explore how the subdiscipline – after a few false starts – has grown ever fitter

Looking back through the mists of time, it could be argued that sport psychology (‘the application of psychological theory and methods to the understanding and enhancement of athletic performance’) has been ever present in our history. In the earliest times its role will not have been formal or even helpful, but every grunt or comment passed on performance or sporting commitment will have been an example of naive, untutored ‘sport psychology’ in action.

By the time of the ancient Greeks, things had progressed. Literature of this era is sprinkled with references to the use of the psychology of sport (see Gardiner, 1930; Sweet, 1987). As one example, by AD200 the tetrad system had been established as the gold standard for optimising athletic performance. According to this system, Day One should be devoted to ‘Preparation’, Day Two to ‘Concentration’, Day Three to ‘Moderation’ and Day Four to ‘Relaxation’. This approach actually represents a precursor to modern day ‘periodisation’, whereby training for major competition is varied in planned phases. But, as psychologists know to their cost, over time ideas can be both used and misused at will. For example, exercise psychologists who promote the motto *mens sana in corpore sano* (‘A healthy mind in a healthy body’) may be surprised to learn that in its original context – the Roman author Juvenal’s 10th Satire, written in the first century AD – far from

exhorting people to embrace physical activity, the phrase ponders the prospect of old age: *orandum est ut sit mens sana in corpore sano* (‘Your prayer must be that you may have a sound mind in a sound body’).

Turning the clock forward some 1800 years, we encounter the first stirrings of present-day sport psychology. The great German scientist, Hermann von Helmholtz, during a stay with Professor Peter Tait of Edinburgh University at St Andrews in 1871, engaged in ‘scientific discussions in the intervals of exercise’ while strolling the links, presumably musing on the physics and psychology of golf along the way (see Wade & Swanston, 2001).

These excursions aside, the first formal experiment in sport psychology is generally regarded to be Norman Triplett’s (1898) study of social facilitation effects, finding that cyclists tend to produce faster times when riding in the presence of other cyclists than when riding alone. Triplett conducted the experiment while a postgraduate at the University of Illinois, and sadly it would appear that his academic interest in ‘dynamogism’ – which began with his involvement in cycling – ended soon after his graduation ceremony.

Slightly later, various other psychologists were similarly influenced by sporting pursuits. For example, Judd (1908), Swift (1910) and Lashley (1915) investigated skill-learning using ball-tossing and archery. Outside the

laboratory G.T.W. Patrick (1903) studied the psychology of American football, musing on the obsession with the game among the US public. In his own words, ‘Evidently there is some great force, psychological or sociological, at work here which science has not yet investigated.’ Howard (1912), working from a psychoanalytic perspective, likewise was more concerned with spectators than athletes, in his case examining the cathartic effects associated with watching sport.

Despite these flickers of interest, sport psychology did not become formally established until the 1920s with the arrival of Dr Coleman Roberts Griffith. His interest began as a PhD student at the University of Illinois under the supervision of Morgan Bentley (a former student of E.B. Titchener: Green, 2003) but gathered further momentum following his appointment to the teaching faculty. An educational psychologist by training, Griffith taught within both the Psychology and Physical Welfare Departments. In 1923 he introduced a course entitled Psychology and Athletics, and in 1925 he was instrumental, along with his mentor and dean, George Huff, in establishing the Athletic Research Laboratory.

His research interests were wide ranging but always with a primary emphasis on practical application. This orientation is reflected in the content of his two most celebrated texts, *The Psychology of Coaching* (1926) and *Psychology and Athletics* (1928). Sadly, by 1932 funding from the Athletic Association was withdrawn, and he then largely turned his back on sport, later becoming provost at the University of Illinois and then head of the National Education Association’s Office of Statistical Information. He did make

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sporadic excursions back into the world of sport psychology however, including an ill-fated spell as sport psychologist with the Chicago Cubs baseball team in 1938. Among other things, he was asked by the Cubs' President to find the psychological profile of a champion baseball player but, to the apparent amusement of players and coaches alike, his quest proved fruitless.

For the emerging field of sport psychology, Griffith's career shift was unfortunate. While the science of psychology continued to wrestle with weighty questions, such as whether its core business was behaviour or mind, sport was left out on a limb, regarded as a trivial pursuit unworthy of serious academic attention (Kremer & Scully,

1994). Fortunately, present-day psychologists have been less stereotyped in their thinking, and have discovered that sport continues to offer a rich natural laboratory for the study of psychological topics such as expertise (Ericsson & Ward, 2007) and anticipation (Müller et al., 2006). Of course, we should also not forget that sport played its part in shaping the cognitive tradition in Europe in the 1930s (Moran, 1996). For example, Frederic Bartlett's concept of motor 'schemata' was influenced by his lifelong passion for cricket. Specifically, he marvelled at the ingenuity with which batsmen shaped their strokes within a certain 'range of anticipation' of the bowler's intentions. Outside psychology, the emerging field of sport science was not slow to recognise the 'power of the mind' in determining performance. Thus while research on motor skills and motor development continued steadily within psychology departments from the 1940s onwards, it was elsewhere that interest really began to grow.

Elsewhere a different game was being played. As early as 1926 Coleman Griffith had visited two newly established sport psychology laboratories in Berlin, run under the auspices of Sippel and Schulte, while other European universities, including Leipzig, afforded sport psychology due regard as an academic discipline. There is evidence that soon after the Russian revolution, Soviet sport scientists were looking at the psychological benefits of physical activity, but it was during the period between 1945 and 1957 that Soviet sport psychology came of age, under the guidance of Peter Roudik and A.C. Puni (Hanin & Martens, 1978). Some of this work complemented other scientific endeavours, including the Soviet space programme, with yoga techniques used to train both

cosmonauts and Olympic athletes (Garfield & Bennett, 1984).

As interest in the 'mental side' of athletic performance blossomed, so psychologists began regularly to accompany Eastern European teams to competitions including the Olympic Games (Roberts & Kimiecik, 1989). More generally, Eastern bloc countries quickly came to accept the benefits to be gained from techniques such as mental practice (see review by Driskell et al., 1994). As early as the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, Dr Miroslav Vanek had developed a large-scale psychological and psychomotor screening programme for the Czech team. Indeed, it was Vanek who had engineered the establishment of the International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP) that met for the first time in Rome in 1965.

In the Western world, the mid 1960s is seen as marking the genesis of modern-day sport psychology – although it was not until 1988 that the US Olympic team decided to bring along a sport psychologist to the games. The late 1960s witnessed a rapid growth of the subject within physical education departments in the US and the establishment of the broad themes that still define sport psychology to this day (e.g. motivation, competitive anxiety, individual differences, motor skills, motor learning, aggression, psychological skills training/interventions, social cognition and team dynamics).

Predictably, structures soon emerged to help consolidate the subdiscipline. The ISSP first met in 1965 and in the same year preliminary meetings were held which led to the formation of the European Federation of Sport Psychology (FEPSAC) in 1968, as well as recognition of the North American Society for the Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity (NASPPA), a society that now comprises three separate divisions (motor learning/control, motor development and sport psychology).

The 1970s saw further professional developments, with the launching of the *International Journal of Sport Psychology* in 1970 and the *Journal of Sport Psychology* in 1979. Despite these activities, the American Psychological Association (APA) only finally recognised sport and exercise psychology as a separate division (Division 47) in 1986. Since then, a host of sport and exercise psychology publications have been launched – including the British Psychological Society's own *Sport and Exercise Psychology Review* (January 2005) and the *International*

Press.  
Müller, S., Abernethy, B. & Farrow, D. (2006). How do world-class batsmen anticipate a bowler's intentions? *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 59, 2162–2186.  
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## looking back

*Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology* (launched at the Society's Annual Conference in April 2008).

As in the US, the race towards professional recognition in the UK actually began outside the discipline with the formation of the British Association of Sports Sciences (BASS, later BASES) in 1984. In 1988 BASES took the first tentative step towards a register of sport psychologists, until by 1992 only accredited BASES members were deemed eligible to be recommended as professional sport psychologists by UK sport governing bodies.

In that same year, the Scientific Affairs Board of the British Psychological Society agreed to the establishment of a sport and exercise psychology interest group, followed by the formation of the Sport and Exercise Psychology Section at the Annual Conference in April 1993. This soon led to the establishment of a Division of Sport and Exercise Psychology at the Society's AGM on 16 April 2005, with Sandy Wolfson elected as the inaugural Chair. And so, with a powerplay worthy of any professional ice hockey team, and with the prospect of statutory regulation looming ever larger,

the BPS seized control and ownership of the only professional area within psychology where practitioners had in place a registration scheme that did not ipso facto include BPS membership.

The degree of professional regulation which now operates internationally through the BPS and related bodies can begin to ensure a degree of quality control that was not always evident in earlier times. Nevertheless, the friction between applied sport psychologists and those out there working in the field can still be acute. A browse through any bookstore offers a real eye opener as to the array of materials that continue to be peddled uncritically under the banner of sport psychology. However, as the BPS register of sport psychologists continues to grow, so the business opportunities for those who ply their trade without having 'served their time' or gained their qualifications within the discipline will hopefully diminish.

At the same time, the well-being and maturity of the subdiscipline reveals itself

in many ways, including a clearer distinction between sport psychology and exercise psychology – the former focusing on competitive sport, the latter dealing with the psychological effects of physical exercise (Herbert, 2008). Certainly, the history of sport and exercise psychology has been intriguing and its future looks no less interesting. At the Beijing Olympics it is likely that the majority of competitors will have worked with a sport psychologist at some stage of their career. As the bar is raised ever higher in elite sport so the difference between gold and silver shrinks, and it becomes ever more likely that sporting success will hinge on the mental working in perfect harmony with the physical.

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## Contribute to the page

Historical investigations not only expand our knowledge of the events that have shaped psychology; they are often richly entertaining stories that allow empathetic insights. Knowledge of the history of psychology enables us to make better-informed decisions today.

This section of *The Psychologist* is devoted to the promotion of historical exploration – the history of psychology and the psychology of history. We are looking for historical studies that reflect on and discuss personalities, events, apparatus, publications or concepts that have influenced the development of any aspect of psychology. This year we have already published pieces on Nellie Carey, the other Psychologist magazine, Adam Smith, Charlotte Wolff, John Thomas Perceval, and William McDougall. We have pieces in the pipeline on Phineas Gage, insomnia, Barbara Tizard and more.

Contributions to the page are not restricted to British psychology and no preference is accorded to accounts concerning the Society. Articles which cross international boundaries or reveal common roots are particularly welcome.

To discuss potential contributions to the 'Looking back' section, e-mail me on [j.perks@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:j.perks@staffs.ac.uk).

**Julie Perks, Associate Editor**

## Mystery photograph

We are unable to identify the subject of this photograph in the Society's visual archive. If you know who it is or have an idea who it might be, please contact Mike Maskill, the Society's archivist (020 7330 0895, [mikmas@bps.org.uk](mailto:mikmas@bps.org.uk)).



