

Becoming a sport psychologist

THE contributors to this special issue are an eclectic group. 'Sport psychologist' refers to a professional psychologist who works with individuals and teams in sport. But some are interested principally in applied work, others in research, while one or two choose to have a foot in both camps. Our contributors are all enthusiasts for sport or exercise, but they sport a wide range of experience and qualifications. Reflecting this diversity, there are currently various routes to becoming a sport psychologist.

Athletes and coaches at all levels are becoming increasingly aware that to enjoy the benefits that sport has to offer, success does not only depend on a sound technique and being fit enough to execute the skills that have been learned. It also relies upon the acquisition of certain psychological skills, such as motivation and commitment, being able to perform under pressure, coping with adversity, effective organisation, and many others (to find out more about what sport psychologists do, see Steinberg *et al.*, 1998). The truth is, however, that sport psychology is still regarded within some sports and by some individuals as an irrelevance and the so-called 'macho' culture of sport may exaggerate such perceptions. Fortunately, matters are improving, but we do not yet have a situation where psychological support is available for all serious athletes: unlike the position with, for example, physiotherapy.

Qualifications

Over recent years major steps have been taken to establish appropriate quality-control mechanisms in the accreditation of the qualifications and experience of sport psychologists, and the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) has led the way in this regard. In 1993 the Sport and Exercise Psychology Section of the BPS was established. The Section now seeks to move forward to become a Special Group as a step towards becoming a Division in the foreseeable future. In the event of attaining divisional status, full members of the Division would be eligible to become Chartered Psychologists.

At the present time there are two broad categories of individuals who may be identified as sport psychologists (as distinct from exercise psychologists, who are not necessarily associated with competitive sport). The first category includes those



IAN M. COCKERILL tells you how to clear the hurdles on your career path.

with an interest or involvement in sport and a first degree in psychology that carries the graduate basis for registration (GBR) with the BPS and eligibility for Chartered status. The second category includes those without GBR but who have completed, or are undergoing, the BASES accreditation procedure for sport psychology. There is also a third category, namely those who are both Chartered Psychologists and possess BASES accreditation for athlete support, although they are few in number.

For some time the BPS and BASES have been seeking to clarify the position with regard to who is eligible to be called a sport psychologist. Although the Society's present position is that in time only those with GBR will be entitled to use the term psychologist, many hope that BASES accredited practitioners will also be able to continue to describe themselves as sport psychologists. When the position is finally clarified, recipients of psychological services in sport will know more precisely who is qualified to do what. It is hoped that the best criteria from the BPS and BASES can be combined in an integrated process of accreditation. There may be some teething problems as the process unfolds, but I feel confident that the system can be made to work effectively. Part of the present unease among some practitioners is that one person may have GBR but little experience of sport, while another has a sport and sport science background but is ineligible for GBR. Addressing these sorts of issue is of immediate concern.

Think laterally

Aside from the above difficulties, there is an interesting literature on the practice of sport psychology that anyone considering a career in this field should consult. For example, in 1995 Kirkby wrote that the notion of sport psychology being a viable career path was largely a myth. In fact, the statement remains true today, with very few psychologists earning their living wholly from sport. Although opportunities have increased since 1995, much remains to be

done to establish structures that support sport psychology as a full-time career. It is well known throughout the world that the majority of sport psychology practitioners have another area as their principal occupation: usually education, or perhaps coaching. The number of full-time practitioners is increasing, but until qualifications are both understood and accepted by the potential recipients of their services, the probability of only working as a part-time sport psychologist will remain.

If sport psychology is chosen as a career, there are at least three paths, largely part-time, that lead from a degree to work in sport psychology. The first is teaching and research in sport science within a university, alongside providing a sport psychology service for university athletes. Second, there is teaching and research in psychology while consulting with individual athletes and teams in one's own time. Finally, there is full-time consulting with athletes, presently for just a few practitioners, of whom some may have specialist clinical or counselling qualifications.

It is interesting that there are presently no BPS-accredited programmes in sport and exercise psychology. The situation is being discussed, but there is no date by which time it will be possible to identify a single route to becoming a qualified practitioner.

What's in a name?

It is perhaps regrettable that psychologists working in sport occasionally choose to refer to themselves by a title that intentionally avoids the use of 'psychologist'. This is especially true now that exercise psychologists are working in the health and fitness industry, where titles such as personal trainer, attitude coach, mentor, and performance consultant are used. You may not like some of them or choose to use them yourself, but they do exist. If we wish to see the general public, and in particular sport's decision makers, understand more fully what a sport and exercise psychologist does, then we should use our professional title where and when appropriate.

It ain't what you do...

The practice of sport and exercise psychology with athletes of whatever age or gender, or in whatever sport, is an absorbing, exciting, frustrating, yet extremely rewarding life, much like teaching and coaching. Rotella (1990) has highlighted several key areas that are essential for successful practice. Among them are issues such as commitment, change, credibility, trust, confidentiality and relationships. Neff (1990) has emphasised some of the problems that the practitioner can encounter. They include something as fundamental as finding a place to work with players. Are you part of the management, coaching or medical

staff? Do you attend games and, if so, where do you sit? Giges and Petitpas (2000) address how to be effective given inadequate time and facilities.

These are important concerns for the practitioner and it is partly because of the fairly rigid culture of some sports, as well as the fact that having a sport psychologist working with the team is new for many clubs, that they need to be addressed. It is essential that one's involvement is handled sensitively and that professional standards are maintained. Simons and Anderson (1995) have focused upon important issues for anyone considering applied sport psychology as a career. They emphasised that knowing sport and understanding the

demands of learning and performance are essential for credibility. Most importantly, however, knowing one's own strengths and limitations is vital for effective consulting. Socrates said 'Know thyself', to which Shakespeare added 'warts and all'.

Steinberg and Cockerill (1999) have addressed some of the pleasures and pitfalls associated with the early stages of practice. While the former would be the satisfaction of seeing rapid improvement in a player's game, perhaps as a consequence of your intervention, the latter might be negative feedback from players because you gave too many questionnaires.

Unforeseen situations will inevitably occur in your work, and it is crucial to the development of applied sport psychology that whatever we do is done effectively. There may still be truth in the old maxim 'You never have a second chance to make a first impression!'

■ *Dr Ian Cockerill is Chair of the BPS Sport and Exercise Psychology Section. He is an honorary senior research fellow in at the University of Birmingham and is also in private practice. Tel: 07774 751615; e-mail: Ian@Athlos.freeserve.co.uk.*

References

- Giges, B. & Petitpas, A.J. (2000). Brief contact interventions in sport psychology. *The Sport Psychologist*, 14, 176–187.
- Kirkby, R.J. (1995). Sport psychology in Australia. *Australian Psychologist*, 30, 75–77.
- Neff, F. (1990). Delivering sport psychology services to a professional sport organization. *The Sport Psychologist*, 4, 378–385.
- Rotella, R.J. (1990). Providing sport psychology consulting services to professional athletes. *The Sport Psychologist*, 4, 409–417.
- Simons, J.P. & Andersen, M.B. (1995). The development of consulting practice in applied sport psychology. *The Sport Psychologist*, 9, 449–468.
- Steinberg, H. & Cockerill, I. (Eds.) (1999). *Sport psychology in practice: The early stages*. BPS Sport and Exercise Psychology Section, Occasional Papers. Leicester: BPS.
- Steinberg, H., Cockerill, I. & Dewey, A. (Eds.) (1998). *What sport psychologists do*. BPS Sport and Exercise Psychology Section, Occasional Papers. Leicester: British Psychological Society.