Understanding high performance sport environments: Impact for the professional training and supervision of sport psychologists

Martin Eubank, Mark Nesti & Andrew Cruickshank

QUALIFYING and, therefore, working independently without supervision as a Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) registered sport psychologist requires domain-specific competence in the four key roles of ethics, consultancy, education and research informed practice. While this represents the official competence requirements defined by the current professional training qualification structure, the ability to actually *'survive and thrive'* in professional practice requires much more. Amongst other things, an understanding of the real nature of the sport environment is fundamental. It is, after all, this environment that represents the 'authentic laboratory' in which the sport psychologist strives to apply the scientific expertise they have acquired. Effective practice is made significantly more difficult without a true understanding of the workspace and its surrounding landscape.

Sport environments, in particular high performance ones, are laden with challenging realities that impact organisational and performance team-specific culture. In this context, culture is about capturing the essence of the organisation's aims and working practices through its people, and how they, as stakeholders of the organisation, represent and transfer to others the core, historically-evolved behaviours and values in their working practice. Understanding the nature of the sport environment and its associated organisational and performance team-specific culture should both be regarded as critical components of effective and sustained working practice. Failure to consider the impact of sport culture on the practitioner's role and mode of operation has potentially negative consequences for their ability to function, and even exist, as a valued and credible 'employee'.

The current professional training process for sport psychologists requires engagement in a diverse range of consultancy experience across a variety of clients, achieved by working with different sports, groups, levels, ages and genders in a number of work-based environments. While prepared with a plethora of underpinning theoretical knowledge and applied practice skills to 'try out', trainees are perhaps less aware of and less prepared for the high performance environment and associated culture in which they may be required to operate. Experiencing this for the first time can be a challenging and daunting experience, and even when armed with the support, advice and experience of their supervisors, trainees will rarely know what to really expect from these encounters.

The aim of the workshop delivered at the 2013 DSEP conference was to help delegates to understand the realities of the high performance sport environment and organisational and performance culture important to effective sport psychology practice. Practitioners with experience of working in such environments shared their perspectives on this important issue. This provided the platform for a group-based activity on the challenges and stressors faced in applied practice within this culture, and explored the

working realities of what the job of the sport psychologist actually does (and just as importantly, doesn't) look like. The workshop then considered the implications for trainees who are attempting to understand and engage with such environments effectively, and to help them form authentic expectations about some of the skills required to work expertly within this, and other cultural realities in sport. Furthermore, recommendations for supervisors in facilitating trainee preparation and evaluation of their consultancy work within such environments were presented.

To provide a more detailed consideration of this important applied topic, and as informed by the workshop content, the second author now presents his perspective on high performance sport environments and culture, the sport psychologist's role as 'cultural architect', and some future-focused considerations for both the profession and professional training. Based on some of these ideas, as well as other perceptions and literature, the third author then provides his brief view on some implications for trainees preparing for and practicing within high performance settings.

High performance sport environments and culture: What are we talking about?

Mark Nesti

Although the ideas on culture discussed briefly in this section are derived from my research and applied reflections, a significant proportion is based on the applied experience of nine seasons delivering sport psychology support four days a week at first team level to several English Premier League (EPL) football clubs (Nesti, 2010; Nesti et al., 2012). This applied engagement in professional sport, alongside feedback from coaches and managers in particular, has helped shape some of the arguments presented here about which psychological factors are most important at this level of sport, and how the sport psychologist can address these. In addition, much of what is discussed is derived from supervising or collaborating closely with sport psychologists, performance coaches, and directors of performance who have worked for many years inside some of the most successful clubs in English professional football.

Although the sport psychology role will ostensibly be about performance enhancement, the reality is that much of what takes place is related to broader issues around culture and organisational processes. Culture is a very important concept for those entering the world of elite professional sports teams. Although it may sound a rather philosophical, esoteric and intangible term, it is deeply practical, solid and very real.

At this level of sport, the sport psychologist will encounter at least some of the following culturally driven challenges; inter-departmental communication problems, coach athlete conflict, interference from owners, negative reporting in the media, and financial pressures. They will find themselves within a ruthless, fast paced and results-focused environment, where everyone must continually justify how their input impacts performance. It is often a traditional, conservative and closed culture, resistant to change and suspicious of outsiders. As a high performance culture, the athletes and staff are usually exceptionally talented. They are confident in their abilities and can be skeptical about the value of new approaches or different regimes.

In some professional sports like football, staff changes are frequent and teams rarely contain the same players from season to season. The feeling in these cultures can be one of volatility, unpredictability and insecurity. Into this environment the sport psychologist must tread with great care! The staff, and maybe players, will have ideas about sport psychology based on their previous experiences. These may not have been good given the number of unqualified individuals still working in some high level professional sports. The sport psychologist will have to demonstrate their value to the organisation, become part of the team without becoming fully assimilated to the culture, and deal with

abrasive banter and questions about the usefulness of sport psychology work. They may also encounter coaches and managers who believe that their own psychological understanding, based on craft knowledge, is far superior to that of the sport psychologist.

In summary, great attention should be paid by the sport psychologist to the specifics of the sport culture they are being invited to join. As one very experienced performance director has observed over many years in their role, 'without getting the culture very quickly, the culture will get the sport psychologist, and they will be removed from their post!'

Sport psychologist as 'cultural architect': The working reality of high performance sport

Based on this cultural 'reality', sport psychology provision in high performance sport could be divided into two discrete areas; organisational psychology to design and build a culture of excellence, and the provision of one-to-one, performance-focused psychological support for athletes (and staff).

The organisational role could involve managing the interface between coaches and sports scientists, helping to shape and drive forward longer-term strategy for the team on matters like, player and staff recruitment, developing internal communication systems, and co-ordinating staff training and development needs. In some ways, it may be possible to view this type of support as being similar to that provided by Human Resource managers and occupational psychologists in many business organisations. This work would be aimed at creating the conditions for a high level performance culture by addressing systems, structures and organisational climate. This role of 'cultural architect' is highly valued by the best performance sport organisations and teams. It is why so many now have recruited directors of performance. This type of work also fits the sport psychology role. For example, all sport psychologists working in full time positions in the EPL at first team level carry out this work; this is largely because it is what the manager and senior staff requires a sport psychologist to do! Unfortunately, with few exceptions (Fletcher et al., 2009), this fact does not appear to have been noticed in many parts of the academic and sport psychology research community.

In addition to this role, the sport psychologist should deliver confidential, individually-focused work for players and staff. This can really only be carried out effectively where the sport psychologist has the support of key personnel (e.g. the performance director/manager). This helps 'buy in', and ensures trust is developed and confidentiality is assured. The types of issues the sport psychologist might have to deal with include the experience of de-selection, insufficient playing time, poor relationships with the staff, and contractual negotiations. Based on many years of research and applied practice, elite performers usually possess outstanding mental skills (Fifer et al., 2008). While mental skills training can be useful, broader counselling-based work is often what sport psychologists are actually employed to deliver in high level sport environments. In the opinion of the second author, these broader issues, which can often be understood in terms of threats to the athlete's identity, can be addressed by drawing on holistic and person-centred approaches to psychology; ones where a caring perspective and a performance focus are considered of equal importance.

Implications of working in high performance sport cultures for the trainee's supervisor

To be able to survive and indeed thrive in carrying out the role of sport psychologist in these incredibly demanding cultures requires considerable knowledge, skill and personal qualities. This last term refers to the character of the sport psychologist; this includes, amongst other things, resilience, integrity, courage and creativity.

Knowledge is always essential to professional practice; without a broad and deep understanding of the discipline, the sport psychologist will be unable to offer some-

thing unique and valued by other specialist staff. From a skill perspective, the sport psychologist must also be able to communicate effectively with what can often be a strongly driven but very diverse group of individuals. For example, it is quite common to find upwards of 20 different nationalities in English Premier League football teams. The sport psychologist in this environment will be faced with a wide range of cultural, religious and social beliefs, each of which will directly impact upon their work.

Unfortunately, there continue to be many unqualified individuals with very limited knowledge of sport psychology working in high level professional sport in particular. Invariably these individuals lose their jobs after a short time in post. In contrast, BPS DSEP trainees are not in this invidious position. However, they must confront the more important issue which is about the kind of knowledge they must possess rather than how much. Based on the working reality of the high performance sport environment outlined above, trainees who have ambitions to work in such environments need to have much more awareness about the importance of organisational psychology theory and research, and a strong(er) background in counselling psychology. The knowledge and the skills associated with these branches of psychology will be of great help to trainee's effectiveness in cultures where mental skills training is only a small part of the sport psychologist's role. It follows from this that supervisors must also be more cognisant of the value of organisational psychology in applied work. Ideally, they should have both an academic understanding of this, allied to practical experience of carrying out an organisational psychology role in high level performance sport. Without this, it could be difficult for the supervisor to actively guide their supervisee, and the role of the former might be reduced to only being that of empathetic listener. Although empathy is important, the trainee sport psychologist operating in such an environment, where their achievements and job security depends on choosing the best course of action, needs more than this from the supervisor!

Beyond the importance of skills and knowledge, there is undoubtedly a need to help the trainee develop various personal qualities that will be essential in carrying out their role. These are vital in such unforgiving, fast moving and high expectation cultures. Outside the moments of elation and joy, much of sport at this level is about dealing with conflict, disagreement, misunderstanding and failure. The sport psychologist will be under scrutiny and constantly challenged, especially if they are highly regarded by the rest of the staff and players! This will be an uncomfortable experience much of the time. The trainee may look to the supervisor for advice on how to develop their underlying practice philosophy, how to manage themselves, and how to respond to difficult phases in their work. The supervisor can guide the trainee to attend relevant courses or read key literature that could improve self-awareness and self-knowledge. Sessions may resemble counselling psychology interventions; dialogue between the supervisor and trainee could usefully be oriented towards helping the development of authenticity, courage, discernment, presence and other personal qualities that have found to be essential for successful practice in these sport cultures (Nesti, 2010).

Implications of working in high performance sport cultures for trainees

Andrew Cruickshank

In agreement with Mark, and normally driven by both personal and professional self-interests, I would argue that high performance settings are often characterised by (or are particularly prone to) social and political tensions. Usefully for all trainees, these challenging dynamics also tend to be features of *any* sport setting, albeit typically to a less intense level. Accordingly, while the following recommendations are framed against the demands of many high performance settings, the general ideas should hope-

fully carry value for the development of professional expertise at any level of sport.

At a basic level, the complex and conflict-laden components noted by Mark, which are also often paralleled in Olympic performance settings (cf. Cruickshank, Collins & Minten, 2014), require trainees to have a well-considered and well-developed approach for setting boundaries, disseminating information, and ensuring client confidentiality (and all other ethical values). Additionally, making conflict and critical debate a normal and accepted feature of life in the performance department (and the wider organisation, if one's remit extends that far) is also encouraged as a way to: reinforce and adjust core values and practices; stimulate the pursuit for 'cutting edge' advances; and, of course, minimise any detrimental 'in-fighting' (for further reference, see discussion on the *zone of uncomfortable debate* in Burke, 2011). Moreover, working to continually build and protect trust and personal integrity will also help to counter the 'one of us or one of them' problem consultants often face when working in support teams (cf. Collins et al., 1999).

At a more 'advanced' level and reflecting the complexity faced, the need for a 'roll with it'/creative consultancy style, and interactions with other support professionals, there is also a need for skills which break through the limits of professional competence to enable development of professional expertise. Specifically, and resonating with Mark's advice that supervisors should support trainees' selection of best courses of action, effectiveness in any environment (and from any philosophical and theoretical position) is best demonstrated by the ability to make efficient, impactful, and coherent decisions. As such, one lens via which trainees (and their supervisors) can work to develop specific, flexible, and ethically-sensitive 'best fit' solutions is that of *professional judgment and decision making* (hereafter PJDM: Martindale & Collins, 2005, 2007, 2012). Although space precludes detailed discussion here, the dynamic nature of consultancy (especially at sport's top level) can be well met via PJDM-based practices. Of particular note, useful approaches include: *'nested' planning and action* (cf. Abraham & Collins, 2011; Cruickshank 2013; Martindale & Collins, 2012); *scenario-based discussions* with established and fellow trainee practitioners that centre upon the rationale behind chosen actions (i.e. WHY *that* way over *this* or *that* way in THIS particular instance?); *experimenting with different options* when creating, delivering, and refining interventions or actions; evaluating practice with clients, peers, and supervisors on the nature, impact, and coherence of decisions (as made against the agreed goals and relationships); and reflective practice which focuses on the *declarative reasoning* behind chosen actions. In short, and in a world of few 'black and white' challenges and many 'it depends' answers, professional effectiveness requires getting (and staying) good at not only 'the what's' (i.e. what can I do in this situation) but also the always unique 'whys' and 'why not's'.

Summary: Implications for the profession and professional training

Martin Eubank

In high performance sport environments, sport psychologists may find themselves deep, very deep, in the 'cultural thick of it'. 'Surviving and thriving' depends on whether the environment as well as the organisational and performance team-specific culture, within which practitioner psychologist expertise is being applied, is actually understood. This is one of the dominant messages from Mark's 'experienced practitioner' commentary, and makes the analogy of 'getting the culture before it gets you' very real! To help with this, Mark identifies two important role-related considerations (and associated knowledge requirements) with regard to performance enhancement and excellence. The first discusses the *nature* of one-to-one psychological support and *how* this is best done. Utilising approaches to sport psychology support that are personally

congruent but also environmentally/culturally resonant is illustrated in the perceived value of both focused/narrower interventions and broader counselling-based approaches that can support 'performance and care' agendas in high performance sport. The second consideration is the organisational psychology focus required to help design and build the 'cultural architecture' within the setting. Being asked to address organisational systems, structures and climates to facilitate the conditions for a high performance culture should, therefore, not come as a surprise to the sport psychologist!

Understanding, and being prepared for, the reality of this type of workplace is important, yet how much or how well this is actually done through the existing professional training process is uncertain and largely dependant on the quality of the supervisor. It is certainly not mandatory that trainees work in a high performance sport environment at some point in their period of training, and there would be no reason to suggest that this must be the case. That said, there are some environmental features (identified by both Mark and Andrew) of working within performance sport that are common (if not quite as intense, brutal or daunting) to many others. These should be carefully considered in trainee reflections on their work to evaluate their impact on existing (i.e. surviving), and functioning (i.e. thriving) effectively.

From a supervisor perspective, Mark's commentary focuses strongly on the kinds of knowledge, skill and personal qualities required by the trainee. In each regard, this provides some helpful suggestions to inform the supervision of trainees operating in high performance sport environments. The specific knowledge and skills required of an effective practitioner, particularly in high performance environments, are seldom well-reported in our literature, and the importance of personal qualities such as, for example, 'integrity' and 'trust' are rarely talked about. This is despite them being described as the foundation of the applied practice frameworks that exist in sport psychology (Eubank & Hudson, 2013). Mark describes how authenticity, integrity and courage are, amongst others, integral to the person behind the practitioner, and should, therefore, represent a significant feature of what the supervisor-trainee relationship and dialogue is about. The trainee's theoretical orientation will be deeply rooted in their own biography, and their personal qualities will play a significant role in developing an effective relationship with a client, which in turn is likely to dictate the quality of the outcome (Eubank & Hudson, 2013).

From a trainee perspective, it is interesting (and also good!) that Andrew comments about the importance of being able to build and protect trust and personal integrity against the backdrop of what he describes as the 'socially and politically tense' (and intense) setting of high performance sport, where the importance of establishing a climate that enables confidentiality to be maintained and conflict and critical debate to be accommodated is necessary. From a knowledge perspective, it is common for trainees to be a little uncertain about the approaches and underpinning theoretical base that govern their applied work (Eubank, 2013). In this regard, Andrew offers a useful approach for trainees to consider that utilises the principles and characteristics of a professional judgment and decision making approach, the benefits of which he has found useful in developing his own practitioner psychologist expertise. In high performance sport in particular, where an intense and frequent pressure to get results is the cultural norm, and accountability (and employment) is a dominant consideration, a framework that facilitates 'best fit' solutions with accompanying rationale and reasoning for those actions may have particular appeal for both trainee and registered sport psychologists working in these settings.

It is hoped that this article will help trainees to be more aware of the reality and challenges of working in high performance

sport, and the knowledge, skills and personal qualities they should look to develop on their journey to expertise within their practice. It is also hoped that supervisors will consider this is an important area of trainee development, and ensure that discussion about working effectively within all types of environments, and what this means for knowledge acquisition, skill development and personal quality awareness is at the forefront of their support.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Dr Jo Hudson (Chair of the QSEP board) and Dr Moira Lafferty (Chief Supervisor, QSEP) for their involvement in helping to formulate the original idea for the conference workshop. The third author would also like to acknowledge the support of Professor Dave Collins as supervisor throughout his QSEP Stage 2 training.

The Authors

Martin Eubank
Liverpool John Moores University
Mark Nesti
Liverpool John Moores University
Andrew Cruickshank
University of Central Lancashire

Author correspondence

Martin Eubank
Email: m.r.eubank@ljmu.ac.uk

References

Abraham, A. & Collins, D. (2011). Taking the next step: New directions for coaching science. *Quest, 6*, 366–384.

Burke, V. (2011). Organising for excellence. In D. Collins, A. Button & H. Richards (Eds.), *Performance psychology: A practitioner's guide* (pp.99–120). Oxford: Elsevier.

Collins, D., Moore, P., Mitchell, D. & Alpress, F. (1999). Role conflict and confidentiality in multidisciplinary athlete support programmes. *British Journal of Sports Medicine, 33*, 208–211.

Cruickshank, A. (2013). A professional judgment and decision making (PJDM) approach to consultancy with an elite junior judo player. *Sport & Exercise Psychology Review, 9*, 15–23.

Cruickshank, A., Collins, D. & Minten, S. (2014). Driving and sustaining culture change in Olympic sport performance teams: A first exploration and grounded theory. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 36*, 107–120.

Eubank, M. (2013). Professional training experiences on the Qualification in Sport and Exercise Psychology: A supervisor and candidate perspective. *Sport & Exercise Psychology Review, 9*, 45–60.

Eubank, M. & Hudson, J. (2013). The future of professional training for professional competence. *Sport & Exercise Psychology Review, 9*, 61–65.

Fifer, A., Henschen, K., Gould, D. & Ravisza, K. (2008). What works when working with athletes. *The Sport Psychologist, 22*, 356–377.

Fletcher, D. & Wagstaff, C.R.D. (2009). Organisational psychology in elite sport: Its emergence, application and future. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 10*, 427–434.

Martindale, A. & Collins, D. (2005). Professional judgment and decision making: The role of intention for impact. *The Sport Psychologist, 19*, 303–17.

Martindale, A. & Collins, D. (2007). Enhancing the evaluation of effectiveness with professional judgment and decision making. *The Sport Psychologist, 21*, 458–74.

Martindale, A. & Collins, D. (2012). A professional judgment and decision making case study: Reflection-in-action research. *The Sport Psychologist, 26*, 500–518.

Nesti, M. (2010). *Psychology in football: Working with elite and professional players*. London: Routledge.

Nesti, M., Littlewood, M., O'Halloran, L., Eubank, M. & Richardson, D. (2012). Critical moments in elite Premiership football: Who do you think you are? *Physical Culture and Sport Studies and Research, 56*, 23–32.