Delivering Sport Psychology inside the English Premier League: Meeting the Person not the Footballer!

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Aims

Introduce context of delivery in the PL
Explain the type of individually focused work that can be done
Explore the key factors that must be in place to enable this work to be useful and effective

This presentation draws on a range of research studies and applied practice experiences in Premiership football undertaken at LJMU Mostly based on delivery at 3 Premiership teams (Bolton 01/07, Newcastle 07/08, Hull 08/09) during last 9 years and total of 17 years sport psychology work with professional footballers

This is not what it is all about as a sports psychologist…BUT IT IS WHAT IT IS ALL ABOUT!

The Context
Manager and coaches are sport psychologists!
Results-Performance-Results!
Volatile, intense, irrational, passionate and ruthless!
Planned, systematic, focused, conservative, traditional and sentimental!
Never ever mellow, long term, transparent, predictable or dull.
Hull City v Man City
Confidentiality!
Should I have walked?
Should I have spoken out?
Whose side am I on—players, staff…owner?
As a (sport) psychologist you need to tell the gaffer…!

Support for sports psychology
The Manager……active, visible support and understanding
The senior coaching team……not against you
The players—the good, the bad and the ugly and the ones who don’t know yet!

Football data!
• Prolonged engagement inside clubs
• 1 to 1 confidential sport psychology counselling with first team players
• Little empirical research……
• Closed world, trust, misunderstanding, conceptualisation of much psychology and sport psychology.

Changing Face of Football
Sport psychology not for the psychologically weak, but for the strong to grow stronger (like coaching in the PL!)
Feminine, soft, hidden, mysterious…in a culture that is masculine, abrasive, hard and clear (Roderick, 2006).
Room for the most important and most useless sports science discipline?
Desire to maximise resources……the business philosophy
Work with individuals

With players, staff and the manager …improve performance
Confidential counselling based sessions
Focus on confronting anxiety associated with challenges….not stress management but become a person with a “less stunted person centre” (Martin Buber).
Become more authentic…be yourself, so you can do the right thing…not just hide or follow the crowd (Soren Kierkegaard).
Make decisions and accept responsibilities for these.

You are not an object/subject but a PERSON
E.P leads to Realism- I am…Therefore I think and feel!
• Radical difference to other approaches by focus on 4 concerns:
  – Death
  – Freedom
  – Isolation
  – Meaninglessness
• At first glance seems unlikely that these issues are relevant for sport psychology practice

Approach draws on existential psychology
• A person is free to become what they desire within the limitations set by genes, personal history, etc - Situated Freedom
• Seems close to a common sense view!
• Existential philosophy focuses on Meaning / Meaninglessness
• Existentialism and existential Psychology has European rather than North American roots (Kierkegaard)

However central interest an Anxiety and Context within which we live and make choices is attractive for applied sport and exercise psychologists
• Views Anxiety as normal - part of the human condition - results from awareness of our Mortality, personal Freedom, (forced to choose), and search for meaning
• Anxiety associated often with:
  • Isolation - New team, new position, different level, etc
  • Search for Meaning-from micro issues to broader life goals, sound values
  • Death - Salter (1997) “Sport Psychologist as a purveyor of immortality” ..............
  • Symbolically - retirement, injury

• Normal anxiety often beneficial to learning and performance
  • To be embraced- not avoided (Ravizza, 2002)
  • Neurotic anxiety results when try to escape from or avoid normal anxiety
  • Sport and football especially at elite level provides opportunity for courage (that is accept challenge and move forward despite anxiety)
  • Neurotic anxiety leads to closing up of the person, avoidance behaviours such as drop out, premature retirement, etc

A form of self analysis and clarification…what psychological skills and personal qualities do I need to develop or renew?

Often an uncomfortable encounter……not about positive thinking….but being real !

Freedom brings choices AND responsibilities…but don’t expect it to be easy or quick.

Very similar to Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996) work with CEOs top 100 firms, Nobel prize winners, sports starts.

Strong identities based on paradoxical set of values:

• Spontaneous and yet orderly (capacity for spontaneity most important sign of mental health and psychological strength…..Erich Fromm)
• Humble and proud of their achievements
• Sensitive to needs of others………
• But able to act decisively and even ruthlessly when required!

• About developing the whole person, their self awareness, self knowledge and identity.
  • This means……… who you are, what you stand for, and where are you going. …….most people pretend they know this!
  • Without this a person will be unable to develop courage…..that is, to put yourself on the line time and time again without really knowing what the outcome will be (Corlett, 1996).
Isolation, homesickness and cultural adaptation

- The Process – Principles
  - Work with the whole person – sport life and non-sport life!
  - Not a quick – fix approach
  - Value free science and (sport) psychology is impossible (a lie!)
  - Stay focused on the Lebenswelt “the world as lived”!
  - Anxiety (normal) is beneficial to learning (and performance)
  - The greater the self, the greater the anxiety! (Kierkegaard)

- Athlete / client needs an experience, not a cure or detached analysis
- Interpersonal parity between psychologist and athlete
- Note Buber’s concerns
- Conversational style and spontaneity
- Note Fromm and May’s warning

- Personality of Therapist or Sport Psychologist is Key
  - Personality – not categories
  - Introvert / Extrovert
  - Type A / Type B
  - But
  - A personality! – only then can a person meet a person (Berdyaev, 1937)

- Most agree that Empathy is a very important part of the work of the Sport Psychologist
- Existential Psychology view – Empathy not primarily a skill but a quality (of a personality)
  - Empathy is not just words but about Authentic reaching out of one person to another person
  - Anything less is best left to sophists!
  - (technicians, Corlett 1996)

- Empathy can be demonstrated in an encounter between persons where barriers are temporarily dissolved and emotions and rational ideas converge (Buber I–Thou)
  - Strengthens the therapeutic alliance
  - However to develop Empathy need – Wide range of Experiences
  - Considerable breadth and depth of knowledge
When Existential counselling in sport?

Where is approach most likely effective?
Boundary situations/critical moments (Nesti and Littlewood, 2011; Nesti, 2004).

Career transitions in sport…retirement, injury, etc. Lavallee and Wylleman (2000)

The former football player finding meaning amongst the carnage!
(Depressed – not clinical).

A question of Identity (Not about AIMS and Athletic identity)
- About Life meaning!
  Closer to Frankl’s (1986) notion of The Search for Meaning

• Goal is not happiness but meaning.

• Anxiety related to “the existential vacuum” (Frankl, 1984)

• Finding a reason to persevere in spite of inevitable sufferings.

• But Van Deurzen (2002)
  • Is client able to accept problem is with living and not a pathology.
  • - not looking for instant symptom relief.
    • - prepared to work it out themselves.
    • - ready to be questioned critically.
  • At what point is this task impossible? (in sport)

• Resistance’s
  • Not for everyone!!
  • If it is not MST it is Clinical psychology
  • Need for different educational process for applied sport psychologists (Corlett, 1996)
  • Considerable experience needed – case for supervision / mentoring
  • Little support in mainstream sport psychology literature!

• Time consuming approach usually
  • Depth sometimes unnecessary where MST will do
  • This is philosophy not (scientific) psychology!
  • Giorgi (1985) It is a Human Science approach to Psychology
  • Requires considerable level of personal commitment and emotional involvement throughout each individual case.
“Requires the sport psychologist to fully immerse him – or herself in a relationship or encounter with the client – athlete that focuses on the discovery of sound values and highlights the importance of recognising the universal human situation, where in Sartre’s terms, we find ourselves condemned to freedom”

(Nesti, 2000, p.126)

And…..Mental skills training

- Improving concentration skills
- Pre performance routines before matches
- Imagery and mental rehearsal skills
- Relaxation
- Arousal control and ‘psyching up’

- About 10-15% of my work with PL players.
- More of this with youth players.

Little wonder the sessions have to be FULLY confidential

- Dialogue therefore is about:
- Dealing with being dropped
- Why the manager is a jerk!
- Plans to move to another club
- Relationships…coaches, players, domestic, family, etc
- Failure to follow the coaches advice
- Enjoyment, motivation towards training, panicking in front of goal, hiding on the wing!

Key factors that must be in place

Trust
- ‘Buy in’ from senior players

Time to build relationships with staff

Acceptance that psychology is hard to evaluate

And what you can do to develop yourself psychologically to address these issues.

Goal setting …yes….

But also thinking about your values, beliefs, attitudes and passions.
Manager’s philosophy in line with sports psychologist about:
Confidentiality, Longer term view, Holistic approach.
Able to work with player’s during good times and the bad!

Must be able to convince players, coaches, manager and owners that concern is, like other staff, on PERFORMANCE.
Must have close working relationships with all staff, especially other sports science and sports medicine personnel.
Prepared to work closely with the club Chaplain.

Lessons for the future
Sports psychologist should not be mistaken for a coach......provide a counter cultural service....someone prepared to ‘stick their neck out!’

Choose carefully....no Guru type psychologists who promise to change the world with one word!

Avoid academic sports psychologist who think MST is all, or psychology is only about caring and being nice!

Can they read the culture without becoming part of it?

Do they have a passion for the game but are, ‘not living the dream!’

Do they know who they are?

Have they had some tragedy alongside the triumphs?

Do they look older than the players?

Have they got a good first touch?

AND

Can they help the manager prepare for their next job!