

From cricket to cage fighting: A week in the life of a sport psychologist

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I HAVE THOUGHT ABOUT writing this article many times but this is the first time I have put pen to paper or should I say fingers to keyboard. I think part of the problem of getting started has been that there is no such thing as a typical week in this job and I guess that's part of what I love about it.

To provide some background about my work as a sport psychologist, I run my own consultancy, Sporting Success. I started the business in 2007 whilst I was doing my Master's at the University of Chichester. I had always had a very clear mind that it was in applied psychology I wanted to work. Whilst I have done some (academic) lecturing and enjoyed it, I knew this wasn't the path for me; neither was research. There were many times during my Masters where I was faced with people outlining the realities of being a sport psychologist especially about the difficulty of getting jobs, the financial instability and the severely limited full-time opportunities available. Whilst all these things I was warned of are indeed, unsurprisingly true, I see them as challenges rather than barriers and I do strongly believe there are opportunities providing people are prepared to work hard. I am proud to be running my own consultancy and wouldn't change it so I hope this article will provide an insight into my life and paint a picture of the realities of being an applied sport psychologist.

As you can imagine, life in this job changes week to week so there is no standard template to work from. There is also a change depending on the season and depending on which sports you work in.

I currently work predominately in cricket, archery, athletics and mixed martial arts (MMA; cage fighting) but I also have individual clients in other sports and have previously worked with athletes in swimming, football, air pistol shooting, gymnastics, golf, hockey, darts, kick-boxing and laser sailing. Two of the main contracts I have are with Surrey County Cricket Club, where I am just about to start my fifth year with the Academy and Archery GB where I have been working with the Paralympic squad since October 2010. I would describe my approach as a practitioner as eclectic and I draw on various frameworks including humanistic, gestalt and cognitive-behavioural. I feel this enables me to give the best possible service to the client depending upon the context/situation. Sport psychology is more than just giving athletes a set of mental tool and techniques; it's about self-awareness and personal growth too. This means working with the person first and the athlete second. Sport psychology is also about working with athletes who are already performing to a high standard as well as athletes who might be struggling with performances lapses (i.e. performance enhancement and not just performance management). Finally, sport psychology isn't just about athletes, it's about coaches, officials, friends and family as well. So welcome to my life and welcome to a week in the life of a sport psychologist.

Monday

Monday morning 7.00 a.m. and the alarm goes off – not too bad considering the alarm call can be as early as 5.30 a.m. I wake up looking forward to the week ahead but

equally lying there thinking it is going to be quite a long time until I can get back into bed! I roll over and snooze for another 10 minutes before making it into the shower. Whilst I'm in the shower I think through what clients I have that day and run through the previous sessions I have had with them. As much as I always like to think I am going to remember everything a client tells me, the reality is that I do make quite comprehensive notes after client meetings to ensure I can capture the conversations that took place, any action points for the client or myself and to provide a space for my own reflections on the meeting. Quite often whilst a client is talking it will trigger something in my head, maybe a connection to something else he or she has said or a thought about a different way to approach this particular area he/she is talking about. If it doesn't seem the right time to share this with them then I will make a mental note of it and this is the type of thing I write down in my client notes when I get back to the office. I then tend to read through these notes the day before I am next meeting with the client to refresh my mind.

Once dressed, I make some breakfast. By this point I will also have sent my first tweet of the day (into Twitter!) either related to something I have on that day or a sport psychology-related tweet such as 'If performance=potential – interferences, what interferences can you deal with today to enable yourself to perform at your best?'. 8.15 a.m. and I'm out the door on the way to see my first client of the week, a cage-fighter. I have been working with this client for about 18 months and started working with him ahead of his first professional fight. Initially I was quite dubious about working in this sport since I knew very little about it. I had worked with kickboxers before but I thought this would be totally different. Equally, it wasn't a sport I particularly liked or was particularly interested in, however as with all new clients and sports I went in open minded. And how wrong I was! The two main fighters I have worked with on a long-term basis have totally changed my mind. First, they taught me that

cage-fighting is a form of MMA and that it is a blend of Brazilian jujitsu, boxing, kick-boxing and wrestling, and they are some of the most dedicated athletes I have worked with. Their approach to training is phenomenal and the scientific approach they take to it is impressive. Two of the fighters I work with are well known and one in particular has praised the work I have done with him. He is attempting to change the view of MMA and help people to understand that it is a professional sport and there is scientific grounding to training and performance. This fighter had a documentary made about him in which a film crew followed him in the eight weeks before his British title fight. This documentary, included coverage of his technical training sessions, his strength and fitness training, his nutritional programme, his psychology sessions, physiotherapy and physiological input from the team at 76 Harley Street and consequently he does seem to be mixing up a storm in the world of MMA. The purpose of saying this, is that anything I am about to say about this fighter is already in the public domain and therefore confidentiality is not being breached.

It has been two weeks since I last saw this fighter, so once I arrive we tend to do a review of how things have been since the last session and then pick up on particular themes we are working on. In this instance, identity is a key theme running through our work. We have developed a persona for when he is in performance mode and so we use the session to look at the switching on and off between himself as an individual and himself as his fight persona. For me, this area of self-identity is a fundamental one when working with any athlete, whether explicitly or discretely. Helping an athlete to understand themselves, not only from the viewpoint of enhancing performance but also for promoting longer term psychological health, is vital.

Next, I head to meet my second client of the day, an international hockey umpire. Working with officials is interesting though often overlooked in sport psychology

because the focus is usually on the athletes and coaches. It is a domain of the sporting population that are arguably under pressure when performing especially about decision making, because umpires and referees decisions can change the course of a game. Key themes with the umpire have included dealing with pressure, decision making, reviewing performance objectively and self-belief. I meet this client in a hotel coffee bar, which generally provide pretty good meeting places if they are not too busy and providing the client feels comfortable talking in an open environment. Some clients I see at my office, but since this is a home office, I will see most clients at their training venue, their home or a hotel coffee bar. Finding suitable meeting places can be one of the challenges of working as an independent sport psychologist since the expense of having external office facilities can often not be justified. Most of my sport psychologist colleagues have a home office, and one of the key things I would recommend with this is having a room where you can close the door! In the early days I was working out of my lounge, which initially is fine but it does mean that you are working in the same space as you are relaxing in, and in my case my office desk was also my dining table so I had to keep tidying away the computer, printer, etc., at the end of the day. After a while this does get frustrating and means it's quite hard to switch off from work. The ability to close the door behind you is invaluable.

My meeting with this hockey umpire was at 11.30 a.m. and I arrive at the hotel about 11.00 a.m. which gives me half-an-hour to catch up on emails that have come in that morning and return any important telephone calls. Having a BlackBerry, or a telephone where you can get emails on the go, is necessary when you are out of the office. The last thing you want is to be spending every evening catching up on emails from the day so it's usually much more efficient to deal with them as you go. This isn't always possible but where it is possible, this is the approach I try to take. Emails come in many

forms: from clients; from coaches about players or about perhaps the structure of a training session; from performance directors asking about progress being made; from potential new clients making an enquiry; from science and medicine colleagues such as a physio informing you of progress an athlete is making with their injury rehabilitation; from students asking careers advice, from journalists asking for 'expert' input into an article; and so on.

1.30 p.m. and I'm back home having some lunch, after which I spend an hour writing up client notes from the morning and then move on to preparing for my next client who is due to arrive at 4.00 p.m. This client is a young athlete (aged 11) who is talented in different sports and some of the areas we work on include having a positive mindset, dealing with failure, and self-esteem. I love working with young athletes because there is a freedom to be creative. When working on confidence for example, I will often talk about 'Christopher Confident' and ask them to either make 'Christopher' out of plastercine or draw a picture of him, and then we talk about all the characteristics and attitudes Christopher might possess and then look at how that might relate to the athlete themselves. In my experience using art during sessions can be useful especially if the client has difficulty articulating their feelings.

3.00 p.m. and I'm ready for a tea break and to pack an overnight bag. Straight after my next client I will be going to the Surrey Cricket Centre in Guildford for Surrey County Cricket Club Academy training and from there I will drive up to Ipswich ahead of a day of delivery tomorrow.

6.00 p.m. I arrive at cricket. Formal training hours are from 7.00 p.m. to 10.00 p.m. for Academy players (aged 15 to 18), however, coaches and players arrive from 6.00 p.m. to get prepared. This is a good opportunity to check in with coaches and players and as a staff unit (coaches, psychologist, S&C & Physio) we will often have brief meetings so any issues that we need to be

aware of can be raised – this could be anything from a player's injury update, how a player is generally progressing with their training, something I might need the staff to be aware of (with the players permission) or just clarification over how the programme is going to be running that evening. On this particular evening my focus is initially on the fast bowlers with the theme being 'pre-delivery routines'. We start with a classroom-based session where I facilitate a discussion with the bowlers around things such as 'how important is the mental side of bowling; what kind of pre-match preparation do you find effective; sharing experiences of when your mindset has helped you bowl at your best; sharing experiences of when your mindset has prevented you from bowling at your best; what is a routine; how is it different from a superstition' and so forth. This promotes good discussion and then we move specifically onto mental strategies that can be built into a routine, more specifically I take them through a visualisation and breathing exercise. In the previous week their bowling coach and I had led a session with them in the nets where we were encouraging the players to produce words that represented the delivery they were trying to bowl, for example, 'flick' for a slower ball and 'snap' for a bouncer. It takes time to establish which words are the most effective, and sometimes a word a player initially thinks will work, turns out not to be quite right so to a certain extent it's a process of trial and error until they establish what works for them. This week the idea was to incorporate these words into their routines so this was also discussed in the session.

Once the 'classroom' session was completed we went into the nets where the players took part in their technical bowling session; a key part was incorporating the mental aspects we had just been addressing. It is vital that the coach is involved in this process so it is a triangular relationship between player, coach and psychologist. After two hours with the bowlers, I spent the final hour of the training session with two

batters and one of the batting coaches in the nets. My remit during this session was to help the players stay focused on the process of what they are trying to do and not get too 'wrapped up' in the outcome – this is important during a technical training phase, in which players can become easily frustrated, especially if they are making significant changes to their game. Again working closely alongside the coach on this is crucial to ensure that views are aligned and the player is not receiving mixed messages (e.g. how long changes takes).

10.00 p.m. and it's back in the car and a drive to Ipswich is upon me. I'm feeling tired but satisfied with how the day has gone and certainly looking forward to getting to the hotel and getting into bed. Usually there is a lot of time spent travelling in the car and if I can make productive use of this time, such as making phone calls then I will, but not many people appreciate calls at 10.00 p.m.!

Tuesday

7.30 a.m. alarm call – wake up and reflect on what a busy day it was yesterday, then my thoughts turn to today. As mentioned in the introduction I do some work in the corporate sector. I work as an associate for Planet K2 who help companies to prepare and perform like elite athletes. I usually do around four days a month but during the height of cricket and archery competitions in the summer, I may not do any. The work that I do involves a mixture of working with teams and one-to-one with individuals. I enjoy this work not least because before doing my sport psychology training I considered doing occupational psychology so now consider myself lucky to be able to work in both spheres (albeit the work may be different to that of an occupational psychologist).

The work I am doing today is running a team development session using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). I am a registered MBTI practitioner and competed my training for this about 18 months ago. I like this psychometric because it is based on the

concept of 'preference' and, therefore, does not 'pigeon hole' people. People do end up with a personality preference that is one of 16 different types, but this is not to say that will determine how they will behave in all situations and part of the process of knowing your type is learning when you need to flex. The analogy is like thinking of a 16-roomed house, one room per personality type. Everyone has a preference for spending most time in one room, but that is not to say they can't or don't visit other rooms and indeed good type development would suggest that we can learn to be in other rooms when appropriate. For example, I might naturally be an extraverted character, but at certain times I may benefit from taking an introverted approach to something, where I allow myself time to think and reflect before speaking. The MBTI also works well in a team environment because it allows people to value differences between team members and learn to use those differences constructively rather than allowing them to become a source of frustration. It is also possible to establish what the teams' type is and, therefore, establish what their strengths as a team are likely to be and also their potential blind spots. MBTI is also useful in understanding how people respond to change and what different people might need in times of changes. Furthermore it can be used to understand responses to stress, approaches to leadership, communication styles and so on. It is a tool that I have found useful not only in the corporate work that I do but also in my sport work and I regularly use it with both individual athletes, teams, coaches and management.

On this particular day the aim was to facilitate the team I was working with to go through a self-assessment process where the concept of MBTI is outlined to the team and we complete exercises that help them to establish their individual type. This is an interactive session and is often fun. It can also provide some light-bulb moments as people start to understand themselves and their colleagues better, which often explains

certain behaviours within the team. Once everyone has got some indication of what their own type might be, we then look at what the implications are for the team (i.e. what is the team type, what are the differences between the team members, what are the similarities, how will knowing this information help them to work even more effectively together and so on). At the point of doing the MBTI with the team, I had been working with them for the past three months; they had had an initial two-day kick-off session, a team coaching session one month later and this was their second team coaching session. The team will have around eight coaching sessions across the course of about 12 months and are on a K2 programme called Elite Team. All the work that is delivered by K2 is based on taking the principles of high performance from the world of elite sport and translating them into the corporate arena.

So I finish the team session in Ipswich around 3.00 p.m. and am back on the road around 3.30 p.m. once I've checked in with the team leader on how s/he felt the day went. Luckily this finish time means I'm able to beat most of the traffic and not have to spend too long on the car park that is the M25. Once home I spend half-an-hour writing notes about yesterday's 4.00 p.m. client and also notes from Academy training. I then email the material from today's session to the team I was working with before escaping to the gym. 7.30 p.m. I'm back home again and the evening is mine.

Wednesday

7.00 a.m. and the alarm goes off. I wake up and check in with Twitter... got to be done, first chance to see what's going on in the world (I did warn you I love Twitter!) Up, dressed, have breakfast and at 8.15 a.m. I'm out the door. Off to see another cage fighter who is a couple of weeks away from a major fight. We have been working together for about six months in the run up to his fight. This close to the fight the session is focused around the final stages of his

training and winding down before the event. We review how things have been going since the last session and recap on the key strategies that will be crucial come crunch time. Along with this we spend quite a bit of time discussing how to manage increasing external pressure (organisational stressors) that can appear at this point in time before a fight (including pressure from sponsors, management and family especially when cutting weight which has an impact on mood) and then we arrange to meet for a final time post weigh-in next week.

I get back to the office from this client meeting around 11.00 a.m. and write up the notes and then catch up on my emails from the day before. At 12 noon I have a telephone session with a swimming client. I don't do many consultations on the telephone, since I find they are more effective face-to-face, but this is a swimmer whom I have worked with previously face-to-face and is now living in a different location so logistically it doesn't work to meet up in person. The telephone consultations work since there is an existing relationship and I am doing some short-term work with her after an injury she is struggling with. The physical rehabilitation of elite athletes is usually outstanding, however, the psychological rehabilitation is not often given the same recognition and I think this is often true once the physical injury may have healed – the mental scars can often last longer yet once the athlete seems physically fit they are deemed ready to return to competition. There needs to be more joined up thinking to ensure athletes are not only physically ready to return to competition but also mentally.

Once the notes are written up from this client, I have some lunch and then head out for a meeting with Farrow Creative who are the company behind my new website. When I first set up my business, one of the first things I did was create a website, but since then I've not done much with it so it was about time it had a facelift! I think a website is important because not only does it enable

people to find you, but it also provides some more information for people who are not sure if sport psychology is the right thing for them. It can act as a shop window for you and I found it especially helpful in the early days when I was out and about talking to people about what I was doing because it gave me somewhere to direct them to so they could find out more information about me and what I do. This was a successful meeting because I came away feeling like the company have a good understanding of me and what I want and they have some good ideas for the website; looking forward to seeing their designs.

From here I head to see my next client at her school. She is a 16-year-old skier, who is currently rehabbing from a serious injury, which is potentially career threatening. It was originally the Head of Fitness and Conditioning at the elite sports centre at the school that contacted me to work with this athlete. I initially had a meeting with the skier and her mum and then we agreed to work together. The school have been supportive and as a result I have been able to see her at school, which is useful because there is only a limited amount of time slots for post-school sessions in my diary so being able to see her during school hours meant I was able to take her on as a client. I also find that after school young athletes can be mentally tired so it doesn't always make for the most effective sessions. Work with this client is still relatively new but the relationship between us is quickly growing and it works well to have open communication channels between herself, her fitness and conditioning trainer, the school, her mum and myself to ensure that we are all working towards the same outcomes. It is also important that the fitness and conditioning trainer and I regularly communicate because the physical and mental impacts of any injury are so entwined that a joined up approach is optimal. Therefore, building these relationships with all parties is essential to ensure the best possible support is provided to the athlete. From here I head home and grab

some dinner and then it's back to the Surrey Cricket Training Centre for a Safeguarding and Protecting Children course. I completed one of these when I did my cricket coaching certificate but I need to ensure I update it every three years and this evening was specific to Surrey CCC policies. There is so much I have to consider when working with U18s so it's was good to ensure I am up to date in this area. 10.00 p.m. home – switch off and bed.

Thursday

7.00 a.m. the alarm goes off. I'm feeling a little tired today so I decided to stay in bed a bit longer – working for yourself requires a lot of self-motivation and discipline! By 8.30 a.m. I'm up, dressed and in the office. I spend 45 minutes writing up notes from the final client of the day yesterday and sorting through emails. I then spend 45 minutes preparing for the session that I shall be delivering for one of the London-based Premiership football club academies in the afternoon. This prep work is making sure I have everything ready that I need to take with me, running through the workshop in my mind, checking the video clips on Power-Point are working and such like. I have already done the main preparation for the workshop last week so this is just getting my head in gear. The session that I am delivering is on the 'pitfalls of being a professional'; essentially it's about making sure the mindset is right to enable the players to make the most of their opportunity and potential, some strategies to help them do this, and some as the name suggests, pitfalls to be aware of. I'm delivering this session on behalf of a company called i2i, run by Michael Finnigan, who have an agreement with the Premier League to deliver this session to all the Premiership football academies and my role within this is to deliver to the clubs in the south. This opportunity came about since I have known Michael for a number of years. We first met through a charity we were both supporting which was around the time I was about to start my

Master's. Due to our common interest working in sport, we stayed in touch and regularly spoke about the possibility of doing some work together but due to a variety of reasons this never happened until this project came up. Michael is based in the north-west of England and whilst i2i clients are all over, it made sense to have someone based in the south for this particular piece of work.

At 10.00 a.m. I leave home to drive to the club. Mileage wise this isn't too long a journey for me, but due to the joys of traffic in the area it takes the best part of two hours. On the way, I speak with Tom Young, from i2i who delivered a similar session with one of the northern Premier League clubs the day before to check in with how that went. Once I arrive at the ground (times like these you do sometimes have to remind yourself how lucky you are to be doing this job), I get set up in a great location overlooking the pitch and ensure all the technology is working. As usual (!) there is a problem with getting the laptop linked up to the TV screen but luckily a guy from IT is on hand to assist. Minor panic over and I am taken to lunch. This provides a good opportunity to meet with some of the staff involved in the Academy and understand a bit more about their roles and how the academy operates.

12.45 p.m. and the session with the players is underway. Initially the players are quiet but once we get into it and they realise this isn't going to be a session of me standing and lecturing to them, they get involved and we have some great discussions and they do some planning around what they are going to do differently as a result of this session. The players were interested to learn and discussions about self-talk and visualisation were particularly effective with players seeing how this could translate into performance gains. 3.00 p.m. and I'm heading off from there, half-an-hour later than planned so I'm slightly concerned about how the traffic is going to be considering I've got to get back as Thursday evening is back to the Surrey Cricket Training Centre for Academy

training. Thankfully the traffic is ok and I get home about 4.45 p.m., leaving me 45 minutes to get changed, get my stuff together and head off to Guildford.

Similar to Monday evening I arrive around 6ish and check in with the players and coaches before the session starting. There is also some healthy snack food provided so I usually have a chance to get something to eat and have a cup of tea during this time. I have an hour with the spin bowlers, an hour with the seam bowlers and an hour with a batter one-to-one. The sessions with the bowlers are conducted in conjunction with the coaches. The focus with the spinners is on body language, so I work alongside the coach to reinforce why body language is so important, what impact it can have and how to adjust your body language. To assist with this we video the players bowling and play this back on the TV screen to them and get them to assess their own body language as well as each others. We then get them to change their body language – both to become more negative and more positive – so they can see and feel the differences. For example, after releasing the ball, getting them to have their head down and not looking around, walking back to their mark slowly and shuffling their feet versus head held high walking back to their mark confidently and with purpose. The timing of this session is still in a technical training phase but in the coming weeks the bowlers will start to face live batters and the emphasis will move towards more of a tactical focus so it's important for us to help the spinners have more of a presence and be a little bit more aggressive through the way they bowl and the body language they display in their approach to bowling.

The session with the seam bowlers is a continuation of Monday evening, so again, alongside the coach, we continue to look at their routines and this time extend it to their routines once they have released the ball, that is, getting their head switched into thinking about the next delivery and not pondering too long on the last delivery

regardless of whether it was the best ball or the worst they had just delivered. We addressed the different zones of attention to assist with this and drew this up on the white board in the nets to get the players thinking about which stages of attention it would be appropriate to be in at different points of time during their bowling spells. We then used different coloured cones to map this out on the floor to help reinforce it in a practical sense and so the player could see what zones they were in and when.

The final hour of the evening was spent with one of the academy batters having a one-to-one session which focused on identifying what his strengths are and in what ways he feels he is currently stretching himself in training. This session was aligned with what we call the 'Triple S' philosophy; a notion we have tried to integrate into the whole of the programme this past year. Triple S is about knowing what your *Strengths* are, understanding that you have to *Stretch* yourself in a training and performance environment to improve and being aware of when you might experience *Stress* (unable to cope with the situations; skills are not developed or enhance enough to cope). In diagrammatic form this is presented as three circles as shown in Figure 1 overleaf.

The aim is that over time players' strengths zone will grow as a consequence of having stretched themselves (see Figure 2 overleaf) and consequently they will have learnt some coping strategies and have less potential situations that will cause them stress. The result is that they are able to perform to a higher standard more consistently.

Please don't read too much into the graphics. They are just meant as a simple way to demonstrate the principles to the players!

Part of the reason for establishing something simple like the 'Triple S' comes from my view that many young athletes can find it difficult to identify what their strengths are and as a result can be low in sporting confidence despite being in an elite academy (this goes for other sports too, especially in my

Figure 1.

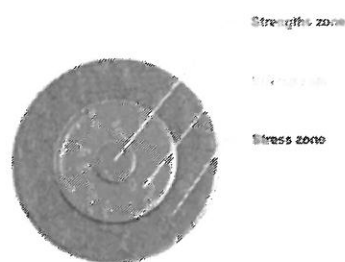
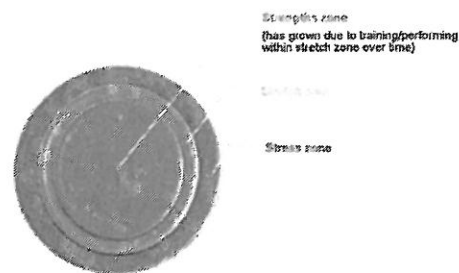


Figure 2.



experience athletics). Part of this no doubt is the British culture where people are not generally very good at talking about what they're good at but equally I think it is related to young athletes putting pressure on themselves and their strong desire to perform and live up to perceived expectations from coaches and parents. Many of the players for example have never experienced failure, so it becomes a fear, and in turn these factors if not managed appropriately can result in reduced confidence. My view is that if players can learn to have a solid understanding of their strengths it will begin to improve their confidence but it will also encourage them to push themselves in training because they have a good psychological base with which to start from, therefore the risk of making mistakes seems to be one they are more willing to take in their pursuit of success.

So, the past year there has been a push to develop a strengths focused environment within the Academy so players go out on the pitch at 11.00 a.m. knowing exactly what they're adding to the team, what skills they're specifically taking onto the pitch to enable them to be successful and what strategies they can use to enable them to perform more consistently.

Once academy training is finished I get home by about 10.45 p.m., have a hot chocolate, check out what has been happening on Twitter, pack my stuff for the following day and finally get into bed.

Friday

6.00 a.m. wake up and get up quickly as I need to be out the door by 7.00 a.m. I make a cup of tea and put the radio on and hear everyone talking about the weekend being upon us. That might be the case for a lot of people but weekends rarely exist in the world of sport! Still three days of the working week to go! Today I am heading up to the Lilleshall National Sports Centre, which is where Archery GB are based and where the training camps for the Paralympic Squad are held. This is quite a long journey for me but as with a lot of my work, travel expenses are remunerated which helps. My role involves providing support to the archers both individually and to the squad in a team sense, as well as providing a programme of development for the staff involved with the squad to enable us to work together as effectively as possible, not only with each other but also as a wider team in the run up to London 2012. There are two other psychologists working with Archery GB, one with the development squad and one with the Olympic squad. We connect with one another as much as possible and meet up about once a quarter to review where we are at with psychology as a whole. We work collaboratively where possible and share ideas (e.g. how to approach and help with 'target panic') and resources for example workshop slides where appropriate. I find this a good source of CPD, which again when working as an independent practitioner can be hard to organise.

So anyway, I arrive up at Lilleshall about 11.00 a.m. in time to see my first archer of the day. This is a one to one session in which we are working on focusing. Archery is a closed skill sport and there is a lot of time to think since archers can, for example, have four minutes to shoot six arrows and then have a break whilst arrows are scored and collected before shooting the next end, so getting the mindset right is vital for archers. Whilst no one else can directly influence your performance, indirectly they can if you allow them too. For example, when shooting a head-to-head, which is one archer competing against another archer in an elimination round, what the other archer is doing does not have a direct influence on your performance. However, if you see them shoot a good first arrow it can place pressure on you to shoot a good arrow in reply. When you're shooting there is no interference from the opponent, however, if their performance plays on your mind it can lead you into difficulties if not managed appropriately. Straight after I see another archer one-to-one before having some lunch and checking in with the performance unit staff. At 1.30 p.m. the staff involved in the training camp meet ahead of training officially starting at 2.00 p.m. The purpose of this meeting is for the team manager and head coach to relay any information and likewise for myself, the physio, doctor and coaches to do the same. For example, clarifying the schedule or any last minute changes to it, updates on any injuries, any visitors to the camps such as a journalist coming to interview an archer or perhaps informing the coaching team of an issue at home an archer has asked me to relay so staff are aware. The rest of the afternoon for me is seeing archers one-to-one – I see four on this afternoon. These take place away from shooting but as we get closer to the competition season I do more interactive sessions with archers on the shooting line – this is especially helpful when working on things such as pre-shot routines and between-ends routines.

6.30 p.m. we all have dinner and at 7.45 p.m. we are back down in the performance

unit as I am delivering a team workshop. These are aimed at archers who have recently come into the squad and so have not had much psychology support before, however, are open to all squad members and I usually get a full turn out which would be 19 archers.. The idea is to cover some mental skills training which I can then expand upon and individualise in the one-to-one's. These workshops are interactive and provide opportunities for the archers to share their experiences with one another, which usually works very well. I think part of the reason for this is that learning from other athletes who have been there and done it can be really helpful so when preparing for a Paralympics, for example, learning from someone who has experienced their first Paralympics is an excellent resource. However, archery is also an interesting sport where quite often at crunch time in competition two GB archers could find themselves shooting against one another – this happened in Beijing for a medal match, so the dynamics can be very interesting for archers, coaches and support staff. 9.30 p.m. and the workshop is over and we head to the bar for a drink (non-alcoholic – all camps are dry) and some downtime. 10.30 p.m. I head back to my room well and truly ready for bed. Depending how I am feeling I will sometimes get on the laptop and write up notes from the day, but on this occasion I make the choice to value my sleep higher than writing up my notes!

Saturday

6.30 a.m. the alarm goes off and at 7.30 a.m. I'm in breakfast. Lilleshall on the weekends is always a busy place with gymnastics being based there as well and also a lot of youth football. Breakfast is usually a good time to check in with both archers and staff to see how they are physical and emotionally and also to get reflections on the previous night's workshop. I like to know how they found it as it helps me planning the next ones. One thing I can be sure about with this squad is that they are always honest in their feedback! At 8.30 a.m. we are all back down at the

performance unit getting set up for the day ahead. One of the key differences of working with Paralympic archers in comparison to able-bodied is the lifting and shifting of kit (e.g. moving bow boxes from archer's cars to the shooting line, moving bows from one end of a competition field to another, etc.). It is absolutely crucial that all staff, regardless of their primary role, pitches in with this otherwise it can make for a slow process!. The day for me is a mixture of one-to-one's with five archers and some time to be spent with archers whilst they are shooting.

On this particular day I also somehow get roped into having a go at shooting myself – thankfully with a training bow, as some of the bows the archers shoot with are so heavy! Would definitely need to improve my strength if I ever wanted to become an archer! I have to say as well that it is a lot harder than it looks. I think it's always good to have a go at a sport if you are not that familiar with it because it can help you to understand some of the demands of it first hand. That said, I don't extend the same principle to myself when it comes to cage fighting! Getting in the boxing ring to do some pad work is about as far as I have gone for that! But seriously, it can help to build rapport with athletes and show them that you are willing to learn about their sport to be as helpful as possible. It's actually a question I often get asked 'do you need to know everything about a sport you work in'. In short, the answer is no, but you do need to be prepared to do your research and ask as many questions as you need and to be open with the athletes about it. Even now archers will use terminology that I'm not that familiar with and I'll be honest and say 'hold on, you're going to have to stop there and explain to me what that means'. I have never had any athletes having a problem with this and I think in some cases it can help to level the playing field – they're experts in their sport, you're an expert [term loosely used] on the mind, so working together could produce some excellent results.

6.00 p.m. I grab a bit of dinner with the archers and then get on the road by 6.30 p.m. Saturday nights spent driving down the M6 are never that fun but as an injured cricketer once said to me 'you might spend your Saturday nights driving down the M6, I spend my time going into hospital to have operations, it's just a part of the job' – and he's right. I get home about 9.30 p.m., have a glass of wine and catch up on X-Factor (this is meant to be an honest reflection after all!).

Sunday

7.30 a.m. the alarm goes off and I'll be honest I'm feeling pretty tired but thankfully by 9.00 a.m. when I have to leave for work I'm much more awake and ready to go again. Today I'm off to St Mary's University in Twickenham, which is a relatively local trip for me. Athletics is on the agenda today. I run the psychology module of the NVQ in Sporting Excellence which is a part of the Athletics Advanced Apprenticeship in Sporting Excellence (AASE), a programme which those of you working in youth sport will probably be well aware of. Athletes on the programme come together at one of four venues across London and Kent to receive psychology, strength and conditioning, nutrition and lifestyle session as well as connect with their assessor. Coaches are also welcome to attend with their athletes. To be invited onto the programme the athletes have to achieve a certain level based on The Power of 10 rankings either regionally or nationally in their event for their age group (U20/U17) and they have to participate in these sessions as well as their regular coaching within their club. There are certain topics areas that I have to cover with the athletes including motivation, confidence, dealing with success and failure, control and self-regulation, anxiety and attention and concentration. Today's focus is on ideal performance states, which includes looking at how music can be used to enhance performance. This is always a good fun session for the athletes and there are lots of activities for them to do including to

listening to different types of music and assessing their emotional responses. This is especially good if a parent or coach is in the room and they are discussing types of music to listen to in the car on the way to competition! I run the workshop twice with two groups – sprints and endurance athletes in the morning and throwers and jumps in the afternoon. Group workshops in athletics where you have different disciplines together can be challenging since the psychological demands on say a sprinter in comparison to a long-distance runner are obviously different. However, the challenge as the facilitator is to ensure all the athletes are getting an opportunity to share their views and create healthy debate when appropriate, which they generally tend to appreciate, and equally ensure there are individual activities (e.g. worksheets) so the athletes have an opportunity to make it specific to them. This also enables you to go around the group and speak with some of the athletes individually. Come 3.00 p.m. I'm on the way home. Once I get in the door, I turn the computer straight on as I know if I don't then the notes won't get written up and I spend a couple of hours writing up the notes from the Paralympic archery camp. 5.00 p.m. it's time to hit the gym and then I have the evening off before it all begins again the following day (albeit not till after lunch as I decide to take the Monday morning off).

Summary

One of the key things you might notice about this week is that it involved seven days of work. Thankfully this is not the norm, however, six-day weeks are, and on occasion seven days as outlined. One of the skills that is crucial in my opinion to do a good job is planning. When you are managing different contracts and working with range of athletes in various locations, booking time into your diary for preparation and administration is essential. There is a lot of preparation that has to be done and also a lot of administration – something I definitely hadn't consid-

ered before starting the job. Workshops don't write themselves, player reports don't magically appear on your desk and invoicing (very important!) takes more time than you might imagine. The busier I have got, the better I have had to be at planning and making most efficient use of my time. Sometimes, there is a tendency to think for example, no one will know if I don't write up my client notes, it won't matter to anyone else, but importantly it matters to me and matters to the service that I provide to clients. Planning sessions, assessing athletes and writing psychological training plans all takes time and on top of that there are various meetings to attend over and above those with athletes. Planning meetings with performance directors and coaches, meetings with lifestyle advisors, meetings with parents and coaches, meetings with schools, meetings with governing body representatives are just some examples. Essentially I guess what I am trying to say that there is a lot of behind the scene work with this job. I could not have every single week like the week I have described above. The week before the week I have outlined, I had a day in the office, which allowed me to do the necessary preparation for that particular week. It is also important to note that this week was a week during the winter and a week looks very different in the summer when I am most likely to be found outside at a sporting competition (likely involving cricket or archery).

Different psychologists have different views on attending competition, but for me it is an essential part of a role when you are working with athletes over a long period of time. Take cricket as an example, I spend six months of the year working indoors with players. If I was then not to see them during the summer, when I saw them again the following winter I would have lost a whole six months of relationship building with both players and coaches and we all know how important relationships are for behaviour change. Additionally I wouldn't have my own views on their performances based on my

observations, and whilst one could argue it might not my job to provide them with performance feedback, if I have information about a player and I don't share that with them, then am I doing the best possible job of helping them to be the best they can be? An example might be a player who I've worked with in the winter on performance routines. If I then don't see the player in a competitive situation it's difficult for me to see whether he is putting these routines into practice. Of course, I could ask the player but in my experience, at times, especially in the heat of the battle, players might not always be aware of what they are doing i.e. they may think they are implementing their routine but perhaps someone else can see they are not. By having a presence at competition therefore it enables me to play an important observational role, and additionally in the two main sports I work, cricket and archery, they do lend themselves to being able to do some specific work with the athletes during competition. This usually revolves around reinforcing work we have done previously and providing competition specific support. Additionally you can play a key role with coaches during competition and I often find more time can be spent with them during competitions than the athletes – stress management can be a vital component of this.

Overall, I love working as an applied sport psychologist and there are some amazing things that I have been privileged to do such as going on pre-season cricket tour to Cape Town, going to Italy for the Para Archery World Championships, having a tour around the Olympic Park, spending time watching a lot of sport and being interviewed by the media (which in the right context can be quite fun). However, all of those experiences involve working very hard – none of the trips abroad or indeed

the UK-based trips are holidays. They involve early starts and often late finishes (in Italy we were up at 5.30 a.m. every day and not finishing until gone 10.00 p.m.) and the hours can be quite anti-social. There is no such thing as a 9-to-5 Monday to Friday in this job and often personal sacrifices such as spending time with friends and family have to be made. Additionally the financial situation can potentially be unstable but longer-term contract positions can help with this. Additionally it can at times be quite lonely. I have spent many a time moving from one hotel to another (I often think that I should be a hotel reviewer as a sideline), spending time in the car doing a lot of driving and often questioning yourself as to whether you are taking the right approach with something. For me, that's where the importance of having a solid support network of other psychologists (applied, research or academic) is crucial. All my colleagues are a great source of support and when we do meet up, whether though an organised forum such as the ECB Science and Medicine conference or through applied supervision days that we have organised ourselves, I always come away feeling that I have benefited from that investment of time. So for all the potential drawbacks about the job, in my opinion the positives far outweigh the negatives and I feel hugely privileged to be working with the clients that I have and be allowed the insight that I have into their lives. It gives me great satisfaction to see clients grow, develop and achieve what they set out to achieve and in my opinion this is one of the best jobs in the world.

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