

Exploring the value of reflective practice interventions within applied sport psychology: Case studies with an individual athlete and a team

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Despite the reported value of reflective learning in the sport literature, the efficacy of reflective practice remains in doubt due to the paucity of applied examples of its value in practice. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to provide case study examples of reflective practice interventions delivered to an individual athlete and a team. The first case presents a reflective practice intervention designed to improve the self-efficacy of an elite, male cricketer. The second case outlines the utility of individual and shared written reflections, conducted by an international age grade rugby squad to construct and evaluate team goals. In both cases emphasis is placed on in-depth social validation procedures used to assess the detail of effectiveness post-intervention. The value of utilising reflective practice as an approach to intervening with athletes is discussed along with the practical implications of making reflection a more integral aspect of applied sport psychology practice.

Keywords: *Reflective practice; intervention; athletic performance.*

IT HAS recently been acknowledged that there is a growing consensus within the applied sport psychology (ASP) literature that reflective practice can benefit both the ASP practitioner and athlete alike (Knowles, Katz & Gilbourne, 2012). The concept of using reflection as an approach to enhancing athletic performance, however, is a relatively new endeavour within the field, with reports of practitioners intervening with reflective practices scant in the available literature (e.g. Faull & Cropley, 2009; Hanrahan, Pedro & Cerin, 2009; Richards, Collins & Mascarenhas, 2012). As a result, the evidence base upon which claims have been made regarding the efficacy of reflective interventions with athletes could be questioned. Cropley and Hanton (2011), for example, have cautioned that the findings of some of these studies do little to elucidate the potential cause and effect relationship between the adopted reflective practices and enhanced athletic performance. Thus, understandings of the potential impact of

reflective practice in this context are equivocal.

The scope and depth of the evidence supporting the value of reflective practice in other fields (e.g. nursing, education) is extensive and well established. This is exhibited in the development and growth of the *Reflective Practice* journal, which indicates the global interest in, and utility of, reflective practice as an approach to personal and professional development. Nevertheless, despite the field of ASP sharing similar characteristics with these other professions, the idiosyncratic nature of helping athletes to achieve peak performance and the unique context in which sport exists warrants the development of a more specific research base. Indeed, some time ago, Hardy, Jones and Gould (1996) outlined the importance of the field of ASP establishing a structured body of knowledge for professional accountability reasons. Hardy et al. also suggested that for the profession to progress, research reporting the effectiveness of elite athlete

interventions should be prioritised. In support of this, Knowles et al. (2012) suggested that in order to create a case that convinces athletes to engage with and explore reflective processes, there needs to be more accounts from experienced practitioners in sport psychology that focus on the impact of reflective interventions in sport.

In light of the preceding discussion, the current paper presents two ASP case studies in an attempt to improve understanding of the way in which reflective practice might facilitate the development of athletic performance. The specific aims of doing this are twofold. First, the paper aims to present examples of real-life sport psychology in action in an attempt to inform readers of approaches to working with athletes in different contexts. Second, the paper aims to build upon claims in recent literature regarding the value of reflective practice as an innovative approach to athlete learning and development by exploring the efficacy of reflective interventions in elite youth cricket and rugby union. The case studies initially present contextual information to set the scene in which the ASP support took place. Specific interventions are then presented in different phases to elaborate on the service delivery process. During these two phases the authors have attempted to support their analysis of the situations and underpin their actions with insights into their professional judgement and decision making (Martindale & Collins, 2007). In view of the comments of Anderson et al. (2002) that practitioners must take responsibility for evaluating and documenting their effectiveness, insights into the evaluation processes adopted are then presented. These procedures attempt to determine the efficacy of the interventions as well as create links between performance enhancement and the use of reflective practice. Finally, a summative conclusion is offered to explicate the key points emanating from the case study itself.

Consultant background

The practitioners (authors 1 and 3) working in the case studies were, at the time of writing, full-time members of academic staff at British universities, British Psychological Society (BPS) Chartered consultants, and British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) Accredited practitioners. They had been providing ASP services for six and seven years respectively, during which time they had worked with athletes and teams from a variety of sports spanning all levels and ages from grass-roots and university sport (non-elite) to age-grade and senior international (elite). Additionally, (author 3) was an ex-international rugby player who held the position of 'head coach' for the team reported in the second case study and therefore fulfilled the dual role of coach and practitioner.

The practitioners had similar professional practice philosophies, approaching their work predominantly from a humanistic perspective centred on the premise that each individual has the ability to achieve what they desire and to control their lives (cf. Rogers, 1974). In this sense, King (2007) suggested that the person and their development are considered holistically through incorporating the idea of self-concept. In both case studies reported in this paper, the practitioners' values led to behaviours that focused on working 'with' the client and developing strength based strategies that emanate from the client themselves (e.g. emphasising strengths, positive emotions, and well-being, cf., Linley & Joseph, 2004). According to Andersen (2009), such approaches support recent views regarding the nature and direction of ASP support suggesting a movement away from traditional approaches and a need to develop more modern, innovative practices that place greater emphasis on humanistic frameworks.

Poczwadowski, Sherman and Ravizza (2004) asserted that an understanding of consulting philosophy is an essential prerequisite to effective consulting practice. Simi-

larly, without clarity on what reflective practice is, and the process of engaging in reflective learning, it is difficult to develop teaching and learning strategies that are likely to be successful in developing reflective skills in individuals (Williamson, 1997). In both cases presented in this paper, the practitioners believed reflective practice to be a process that: (a) engages people in experiential learning; (b) places the 'whole self' at the heart of learning; (c) is instigated through questioning; (d) results in change; and (e) requires explicit training. Engaging in the process leads to new understandings of the self, context and environment that can help to improve what individuals and groups do within their daily lives.

Case Study 1: The use of reflective practice to improve the self-efficacy of an elite male cricketer

Contextual information

During the provision of ASP support to an elite cricket youth academy in the UK, the head coach referred a 19-year-old wicket-keeper/batsman to speak to me (author 1) about his competitive performances. This led to an initial meeting with the cricketer where he highlighted a lack of confidence when batting. This was verified by the cricketer in a second meeting where he was shown edited video clips of his recent performances ($N=3$), and offered to comment on his experiences when batting. On all three occasions he was bowled out for an individual score of under 20. His batting average for the year to date was at 15 runs per innings. During the discussions about his experiences within each game, the cricketer indicated that when he got to double figures he lost focus and changed his routine. He stated, 'It (routine) just all goes, I think that I shouldn't be at this score and that I'll be bowled out any minute... that's all I then focus on and I end up getting bowled out!' In addition to this explanation, the cricketer stated that he could not recall many good performances, and out of those that he did report, he could

not identify why they were good performances. Specifically, he did not know what he actually did to bat well, and he also could not recall what he did during the early stages of each performance to score runs.

To help verify his lack of confidence during batting, a self-efficacy rating scale was developed with the guidance of the cricketer and the head coach that focused on the key factors associated with a cricketing batsman. Twelve items were identified that were incorporated into the domain specific self-efficacy likert scale that addressed the levels and strength of batting self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006). The items were phrased as 'can do' (a judgement of capability) and included, 'I can keep track of every ball throughout my batting,' 'I can make the right decisions on whether to hit or leave with every ball I face,' and 'I can score a 50'. The response scale assigned to each item ranged from 0 'I'm certain I can't do this,' to 10 'I'm certain I can do this.' On completion of the scale, it was evident that the cricketer's confidence when batting was low, with responses ranging from 1 to 8, with an average rating of 3.66.

The low confidence during batting reported by the cricketer and the fact that he could not recall what he actually did when he performed well, resulted in the cricketer and I (author 1) agreeing to the goal of enhancing self-efficacy through reflective practice. Indeed, developing a reflective practice disposition has been reported to improve self-awareness (e.g. Cropley et al., 2007); augment self-efficacy (e.g. Hanton, Cropley & Lee, 2009), and promote athlete autonomy (Faull & Cropley, 2009). Thus, adopting such an approach to intervening appeared to have credence in this case.

The intervention

Based on previous work in other domains (e.g. education) that has introduced reflective practice as a means of improving performance, the intervention administered in this case involved five stages (e.g. Gadsby & Cronin, 2012; Griffin, 2003). These stages consisted of a combination of education,

guided and unguided practice and were developed in line with my (author 1) philosophy for developing autonomy and my understanding of the client.

Phase I: Introduction to reflective practice

The first phase involved discussing with the cricketer the benefits of reflective practice, emphasising how the ongoing awareness of performance accomplishments and the identification of limitations can be used advantageously to identify ways of developing and, as a result, improve self-confidence (Bandura, 2006; Faull & Cropley, 2009; Feltz, Short & Sullivan, 2008). Consequently, the cricketer was given a diary and asked to respond to the following five questions (based on Gibbs, 1988) after a competitive performance, ‘What went well?’ ‘What did I do to make it go well?’ ‘What didn’t go well?’ ‘What did I do/didn’t I do that resulted in a poor performance?’ and ‘What can I do differently/work on?’

Phase II: Unguided reflections

During this phase the cricketer was directed to reflect in his diary following each performance, responding to the questions identified in Phase I. The purpose of this phase was to establish a baseline picture of the cricketer’s ability to reflect. In this sense, the ‘ability to reflect’ refers to the *level* (e.g. descriptive to critical) that a person is able to reflect at (cf. Knowles et al., 2001). Previous research has highlighted that being able to reflect at more critical levels (e.g. reflection that challenges habitual practices) may be more beneficial to the learning gleaned from reflective practice (see Cropley & Hanton, 2011). In accord with the work of Knowles et al. (2001), assessing the cricketer’s ability to reflect gave insights into the ways in which his level of reflectiveness could be improved. I (author 1) met weekly with the cricketer to monitor the reflections, and after three weeks and five competitive performances it was deemed that enough information was gathered regarding the cricketer’s current reflective ability. At this stage, the cricketer’s batting scores did

not change beyond the previous batting average and his reflections post-performance were considered as being relatively superficial (e.g. pragmatic evaluation of events, see Knowles & Gilbourne, 2010). Specifically, all the reflections lacked any in-depth explanation for why he performed well or what he needed to do to improve. For example, after the third match he responded to ‘What went well?’ with, ‘I batted well at the start of my innings.’ He then responded to the follow-up question of ‘What did I do to make it go well?’ with, ‘I was focused’. Consequently, the cricketer did not identify what he specifically did to become focused and how this focused state actually influenced performance.

Phase III: Guided reflections

The guided reflections phase was implemented due to the descriptive nature of the cricketer’s initial reflections, which meant that the athlete gained little from the reflective process with the issues regarding low self-awareness and self-efficacy remaining. This phase lasted six weeks. During this phase, I (author 1) again met weekly with the cricketer to discuss the reflections he had completed. The focus here was to guide the cricketer on providing more depth to the reflections so to improve awareness on the factors that made him a good performer and what he needed to work on to improve. The following extract from my personal reflective transcript demonstrates the discussions that took place:

(author): In response to what went well during Saturday’s game, you’ve stated ‘I felt good prior to batting.’ You then stated that this is because you prepared well. What did this preparation include?

Cricketer: What I meant there was my preparation while I walked out to bat seemed to help me... I was conscious that I was looking around at everything except the opposition team.

(author): Why was that important?

Cricketer: It meant I wasn't thinking about the opposition or worrying about the bowler I was going to face... instead I was picking different things to look at around the ground, like different sponsorship boards on the side of the pitch or people in the crowd.

(author): And this helped?

Cricketer: Yeah it did! I think I worry a lot when I walk out to bat, as it can be a long walk and you have a lot of time to think negatively. So I noticed that by telling myself, 'Who's sponsoring us? Who's in the crowd? Pick a sponsor, pick out someone from each side of the ground,' allowed me to avoid any performance thoughts – which was good!

(author): How about when you were at the centre (of the pitch) and got ready to bat?

Cricketer: I'm not too sure about that, I just noticed that the walk on routine was good for me.

(author): How did you perform?

Cricketer: I started well, had no pressure because I was comfortable at the start... so I could see the ball well.

(author): Ok, this is the type of depth I'm looking for! Identifying what it is you specifically do to get to a good performance or feeling state. So it sounds like the walk on routine helped you get to a good feeling state which improved your concentration?

Cricketer: Exactly that, I wasn't worrying about the opposition like I normally do...

(author): Let's add this detail into your reflections, this is the depth we need to understand more about what you do well and why.

These one-to-one sessions, therefore, attempted to build on the cricketer's descriptive reflections by making sense of not only

what the cricketer actually did well but also how these positive aspects of performance had happened (e.g. conceptualising the cricketer's role in, and factors impacting, his performance). When identifying the cognitions and behaviours that he could alter or improve (when performances were poor) we also focused on such strategies as transferring behaviour that had worked in previous situations and/or guiding the cricketer to identify alternative solutions.

Phase IV: Unguided reflections

After the six-week period of prompting the reflections in the weekly meetings, the cricketer was asked to go back to reflecting on his own without any further guidance. The idea here was to develop autonomous reflective techniques within the cricketer and thus encourage him to take responsibility for managing the situation. Over a three-week period, weekly meetings were still conducted to listen to the reflections, with the depth of the self-reflections having improved considerably from cricketer's initial experience of unguided self-reflections (i.e. Phase II). For example, on the second meeting, the cricketer had provided the following reflections in relation to a competitive performance:

Reflection prompt: What went well?

Cricketer's response: I batted very well for the first five overs of the match

Reflection prompt: What did I do to make it go well?

Cricketer's response: I played each ball one at a time, but before hand I did what I notice I normally do before a good shot, before each delivery... I'd walk away from the crease (to the side), look at where the fielders are, tap each pad, test the ground (with the bat), walk back to the crease, set my feet up, get my

stance ready, tap the bat twice, and watch the ball in the bowler's hand.

Reflection prompt: What didn't go well?

Cricketer's response: I lost focus in the 6th over, I was fortunate the bowler wasn't on target as I'd have been out!

Reflection prompt: What did I do / didn't I do that resulted in a poor performance?

Cricketer's response: I was playing well, and I realise now that when I do start to play well I get too complacent, I relax too much and start getting cocky instead of focusing on the shot... so I miss the bowler's hand then because I'm not doing what I normally do to focus!

Phase V: Evaluation

After the unguided self-reflection period, a post-intervention phase was conducted to evaluate the cricketer's current self-efficacy ratings, batting average, and to conduct a social validation interview to verify the given scores and provide explanations for how the intervention might have helped improve self-efficacy and performance.

Self-efficacy ratings and batting average. The self-efficacy ratings increased to a range of 4 to 9, with an average of 5.45 (and average increase of 1.79). Key changes were observed with the responses to the items 'I can keep track of every ball throughout my batting' and 'I can focus on the seam of every ball I face' as these increased from 2 to 5 and 1 to 4 respectively. Obviously, the scores were still low, but in a short period of time, utilising reflective practice as an approach to developing self-awareness had seemed to have an effect on the cricketer's self-efficacy. With

regards to batting average, during and post-intervention average increased from 15 to 35 runs per innings. Anderson et al. (2002) have suggested that developments in performance provide some understanding of the success of sport psychology interventions and in this case the large increase in batting average may indicate the potential value of reflective practice as an approach to both personal and professional development.

Social validation interviews. A social validation interview was conducted to explore the underlying mechanisms that assisted in the development of the cricketer's self-efficacy ratings and performance. During this interview, the cricketer described how the development of more functional reflective thinking (e.g. reflection focused on developing process-related factors of performance) had helped improve confidence, performance, and also his ability to reflect within performance. Focusing on the benefits for self-confidence, the cricketer stated:

I now feel confident to be able to bat for longer periods of time. Because of reflection I know what I have to do to focus on each ball at a time. I know how to watch each ball. The only thing that matters to me is the next ball, and that (reflective technique) allowed me to focus in on that ball coming down as opposed to being wider in my view.

Similarly, the explanation for performance effects related to the cricketer's better acknowledgement of what he does well to focus effectively on the ball he is facing:

Before (reflective practice), I was telling myself to watch the ball consistently without knowing how to do it, now it's more about knowing the process that gets me to keep my focus, which helps me watch the seam for longer and allows me to stay in for longer! I narrow my focus to what is happening in front of me at that moment in time.

With regards to the increased ability to reflect within actual performance, the cricketer stated:

I still get a bit too comfortable and that is when I slip off and don't watch the ball, but because I know I have this (reflective) process in place, I know I can go back to that and that allows me to get back to that place which gets me to watch the seam properly again.

Conclusion

The aim of this case study was to evaluate the use of guided reflective practice on the self-efficacy and performance of a male cricketer. At the end of a systematic approach to consultancy, the cricketer suggested that the use of guided reflective practice enhanced situational specific self-confidence and improved focus of attention during actual performance. It is thought that by establishing more effective reflective techniques the cricketer was able to develop the self-awareness required to understand the aspects of his performance that were limiting, as well as those that facilitated positive performance. Such self-awareness empowered the cricketer to take responsibility for finding his own solutions to the issues he faced, subsequently impacting the way in which he thought about himself and his performance. Despite the promising findings, however, confidence was still relatively low at the end of the intervention (i.e. 5.45 out of a possible 10). This may suggest that the intervention phases needed to be longer, or that more traditional approaches to developing self-efficacy (e.g. positive self-talk; imagery, mindfulness meditation) need to be built into the reflective approach adopted in this case.

Case Study 2: The use of reflective practice to improve the use of team goals

Contextual information

This case study focuses on an international, age grade, female rugby union team that had underperformed (outcome and performance) over a two-year period; with an 11:12 win to loss ratio. At the end of the second

season, both management and players carried out a major review in which the goal setting process was highlighted as 'an area needing improvement'. In particular, players stated that 'they did not feel they owned team goals' and 'not all players bought into team goals when it really counted'.

The head coach, who was also the lead researcher on this project (author 3), examined the literature around team goal setting in an attempt to address these issues before the start of the third season. Research examining goal setting in team contexts (see Kingston & Wilson, 2009, for review) suggested that goals impact upon team performance by influencing team focus (Widmeyer & Ducharme, 1997), inter-group communication, team commitment and satisfaction (Carron, Widmeyer & Brawley, 1985), and team coordination (Eccles & Tenenbaum, 2004). However, much of this research is conceptual in nature or lacks ecological validity, as researchers have tended to use concocted participant groups. Consequently, building on the applied sports coaching work of Richards, Mascarenhas, and Collins (2009) and Richards, Collins, and Mascarenhas (2012), who used reflective practice to develop principles of team play and role clarity in female international hockey and netball teams respectively, it was concluded that an intervention incorporating principles of reflective practice might be used to better develop player ownership and buy-in of team goals. Indeed, Richards et al. reported that reflective practice helped to improve team identity, improved team decision-making and increased the team's ability to cope in high-pressure international competition. It was thought, therefore, that reflective practice would offer a more innovative and successful approach to dealing with the issues being experienced by the team in this case.

Thirteen out of the 22 players in the squad ($M_{\text{age}} = 19$ years; M playing experience = 4 years) had been in the team for two seasons with the same coaches and had experienced reflective practice throughout the

two seasons (i.e. informal, formal, written, verbal, unguided, guided, individual, shared, player-player, player-coach). The nine remaining players had no formal experience with reflective practice. The primary purpose of this case study, then, was to examine the use of reflective practice to facilitate the setting of team goals with a national age-grade women's rugby team. A secondary purpose was to compare inexperienced and no-experience reflectors' perceptions of the use of reflective practice to inform team goal setting and the impact of this process on performance.

The intervention

Drawing upon the work of Richards et al. (2009), who had successfully integrated reflective practice into team culture, the intervention in this case consisted of four phases. These phases were also crafted out of my (author 3) understanding of the proposed value of individual reflection (Phase I), shared reflection (Phase II), and organisational reflection (Phase III) (cf. Cropley & Hanton, 2011; Ghaye, 2011). The final phase built on the recommendations of Anderson et al. (2002) regarding the need for formal approaches to evaluation in order to sustain the positive aspects and improve any limiting aspects of an intervention. In this case, the evaluation allowed for an understanding of the way forward for the team.

Phase I: Developing individual reflection skills

The players took part in a training game during the first training session of the (third) season and were given 24 hours to engage in formal, written, unguided reflection (i.e. reflect on your individual/unit/team performance without any guidance). These reflections were collected to provide players with feedback focusing on the depth of reflective analysis and quality of action plans. Prior to the second training session players were given their unguided reflections back with feedback, and the main/common issues (i.e. overly descriptive nature of reflections, lack of evaluation and

analysis, no clear and implementable action plan) were shared with the group. After the second training session (one week after training game), players were given individual guided reflection sheets, based primarily on Riley-Doucet and Wilson's (1997) reflective framework. The proforma's included the guide questions: (a) identification – what happened?; (b) description – what went well and why?; (c) description – what went not so well and why?; (d) significance – what does this experience mean for you and for the team?; (e) options – what could you do differently (identify options)?; and (f) implications – as a result of what you've learnt what will you do in the future (action plan)?

In a follow-up to the initial reflective stage, the players were then given the opportunity to review video footage (individual, unit, and team) of the game and add to/amend their individual reflections-on-practice. Once again they handed their guided reflection sheets in to the Head Coach for feedback, which they received prior to training session three.

Phase II: Shared reflections to evaluate performance

After training session three, players completed individual guided reflections. The players were then put into small communities of practice (CoP, Wenger, 1998) consisting of three to four players, mixed in their experience of reflection, to share their individual reflections and identify common themes to feed back to the team. Players again had the opportunity during the process to access game footage to add/amend their reflections. The CoPs then shared their common themes to the team (e.g. missing tackles; not numbering up in defence; over committing in contact areas); these were collated to establish common themes across the whole team.

Phase III: Development of team goals as informed by reflective practice

The common themes that emerged from the shared reflection process were discussed and

translated into team goals for use in the build up to and during the first competitive fixture. For example, an element identified during the shared reflective process was that missed tackles were a key issue so the team set a goal of making 90 per cent of first attempt tackles. The team trained twice more, with training sessions linked to achieving team goals prior to the first competitive fixture. The same process (e.g. individual guided reflection, shared reflection, team goals) was implemented after the first competitive fixture. Team goals were subsequently adapted/added to in the build up to and during the second competitive fixture.

Phase IV: Evaluation

Two focus group interviews (one with inexperienced reflectors ($N=4$) and one with reflectors with no experience ($N=4$)) were conducted to evaluate the reflective practice and team goal setting process and the impact of this process on individual/unit/team performance. Once recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and inductive content analysis was used to identify key themes. The following section will outline the key findings from the two focus group interviews and highlight some coach observations from the lead researcher (author 3) regarding the impact of this intervention upon performance.

No experience reflectors. Regarding the reflective practice to team goal setting process, those players in the focus group labelled 'no experience reflectors' stated that the reflective process was easier to engage with when the guided reflection sheet was adopted. For example, one player stated, 'Thank god for the guide questions, as I wouldn't have known what to think about and write'. Additionally, it was outlined that engaging in a more structured reflective process facilitated the setting of goals to improve performance with one player highlighting, 'It (reflection) helped me to identify what I needed to work on and

how I was going to work on it'. Players with no experience of reflective practice also commented that the team goals emerging from the individual and shared reflective processes adopted in this case increased their perception of ownership and control over goal achievement. Indeed, the nature of the goals changed from the previous outcome focus to more of a performance focus, 'Team goals have usually been to win, but the ones we set this time were more about how we would win, so I felt more in control'. These players also identified the benefit of being involved in creating their goals and the link between individual goals and team goals, 'Because I understood the (team) goal and where it came from, I was able to think about and understand my role in achieving it'. In sum, the main impacts identified by no experience reflectors regarding the reflective practice and team goal setting processes were: (a) facilitating personal goal setting; and (b) having performance related team goals increased their perceptions of control. In addition, these participants identified that for new reflectors, having guidance for reflecting was important as it enabled them to engage in the reflective process more explicitly. Further, sharing reflections was reported to facilitate the process and assist the players in thinking beyond the approaches to goal setting traditionally adopted, thus resulting in greater feelings of ownership of team goals.

Inexperienced reflectors. The focus group containing players with some experience of reflection (two years maximum) highlighted that the reflective process enabled them to set more 'meaningful' individual goals and increased their awareness of their performance strengths and weaknesses and how to improve them. For example, 'By reflecting I was able to set my personal actions for the next game based on my playing experience rather than some desired factor that may not have been relevant'; and 'I became more aware of why I was making those mistakes,

which helped me to change what I did.’ Inexperienced reflectors also commented that the shared part of the reflective process increased awareness of the importance of individual contribution to collective common understanding (tactical), with one player adding, ‘We had an argument about why something went wrong, and I realised (through reflection) I had been doing it wrong the whole time so I can now change that part of my game to help the team.’ Players within this focus group also commented that the shared reflections enabled them, as more experienced players, to share knowledge with less experienced players, which in turn increased those players’ confidence. For example, ‘You could tell the young ones were quiet, so it was a chance to share our knowledge with them and make them more confident by encouraging their opinions and interaction.’ Finally, inexperienced reflectors identified that having team goals, developed through the adopted reflective process, increased collective tactical understanding within the team. It was suggested, ‘One of our big problems was players doing what they wanted, I think having agreed goals has stopped that from happening.’ The captain of the team was involved in the ‘inexperienced reflectors’ focus group and she identified that she used the team goals within her role as captain to keep the team and herself focused on the goals during the game. She stated, ‘It (reflective goal setting process) helped me as captain because I used the goals in team talks to help guide players if we were struggling, and to help me keep focused on us.’ In summary, the main influence of reflective practice identified by the ‘inexperienced reflectors’ on the team goal setting process were: (a) facilitation of personal goal setting; (b) increased collective tactical understanding; and (c) providing information to assist leader communication.

Head Coach observations. In attempts to provide a more holistic evaluation of the utility of the reflective intervention the head

coach’s (third author) observations of both the process and the impact of the process were also considered. Practically, in order for the squad to fully engage with reflective practice and the goal setting process, three hours of training time was sacrificed per training day (four in total) for the intervention to be undertaken. While this sacrifice reduced physical, technical and tactical development opportunities, both players and coaches identified during their review after the second season that psychological factors were the main areas needing development, therefore justifying the approach adopted. Such activities were also considered, by the head coach to improve the training performance of the players thus making better and more efficient use of the time spent ‘on the pitch’ or ‘in the gym’, which again outweighs some of the issues arising over the time taken to integrate the intervention. Specifically, the head coach outlined that the players increased collective tactical understanding (as identified by players in the group reflections), and this reduced the occurrence of ‘on-pitch’ discussion around tactical decisions, allowing a greater coach focus on technical, physical and mental aspects of performance both in training and during games. Whilst it is acknowledged that many other factors may have influenced performance outcomes, the squad won the second competitive fixture against an opponent they had failed to beat during seven previous attempts over three years. The coach identified: (a) player commitment to the game plan; (b) improved collective tactical understanding; and (c) improved leadership as three reasons for the successful outcome. These were also three areas the players identified as being influenced by the reflective practice and team goal setting process.

Conclusion

The aim of this case study was to outline a process of utilising reflective practice in the process of developing and using team goals in an international, age grade, female rugby team. The impact of this process was evalu-

ated through focus group interviews with players as well as observations from the head coach. Results indicated that the reflective practice and team goal setting process impacted upon facilitating personal goal setting and increased collective tactical understanding, which was reported to have an impact on overall team performance.

The positive influence that the reflective practice and team goal setting process had on collective tactical understanding supports the work of Widmeyer and Ducharme (1997) in that team goals impact performance by giving the team a common focus. However, the current finding takes this further by identifying a more specific 'common focus' (i.e. tactical understanding), which in complex interdependent sports such as rugby union, is critical for successful performance and outcome (Wilson & Mellalieu, 2007). The inclusion of shared reflections within the reflective practice process seemed to be an effective way to target the sharing (and coherency) of mental models (Eccles & Tenenbaum, 2004) to improve collective understanding and, therefore, applied practitioners should consider utilising shared reflection in teams to improve coordination.

Discussion: Effective learning through reflective practice

The case studies presented in this paper have outlined how practitioners have adopted reflective practices as an approach to intervening with both an individual athlete and a team. Emanating from these real-life experiences of ASP in action are a multitude of benefits regarding the utility of reflective practice for promoting effective behaviours in sport. These findings support those of Holland et al. (2010) who found that reflective practice, employed by youth athletes, resulted in the development of mental qualities associated with elite performance (e.g. self-awareness, determination, confidence). This discussion will not, however, focus on outlining the key benefits emanating from each case study (this has been done previ-

ously) but instead explore how reflective practice may have facilitated the achievement of the positive outcomes reported. The idea here is to present recommendations, based on practice, for those working in ASP, as well as developing understanding of the way in which reflection may be more successfully integrated into practice.

In both case studies the value of working to develop the skills (e.g. problem solving; critical thinking) and the attributes (e.g. open-mindedness; mindfulness) required for reflective practice is highlighted. This represents a view that merely asking individuals to adopt reflective practice is unlikely to help them engage in an effective experiential learning process. Instead, the power of reflective practice is influenced by not only the aforementioned skills and attributes but also by an individual's knowledge and understanding of how to engage in the process (Cropley et al., 2010). The value of training programmes designed to enhance these reflective skills has been reported in recent research by Cropley et al. (2011) who reported the significance of a multi-modal training programme designed to increase the likelihood that reflective practice would have a positive effect on the practice of sports coaching participants. Despite this, there is little evidence of such reflective training programmes being utilised within the domains of sport psychology and athletic development. Additionally, where reflective practice has been used little insight is provided into the ability of the 'educators' to deliver training programmes and the impact this has had on the participants' reflective abilities. Norrie et al. (2012) have warned that implementing reflective teaching poorly may result in reflective practices not being effectively incorporated into professional practice. Further, research by Epp (2008) has highlighted the need for educators to be able to facilitate and support the reflective practices of those they are working with. With respect to the case studies reported in this paper, both practitioners had received formal training in reflective practice and

been mentored, with regards to their reflective practices, through the early parts of their professional careers (by author 2). It is thought that as a result of this they were in an informed position to design and implement context specific training programmes that led to more effective reflective techniques.

Throughout the reflective practice literature, across a range of domains, considerable debate has focused on the potential value of structured approaches to engaging in the reflective process. For example, some authors highlight concerns that structured reflective models constrain the artistry of reflection (e.g. Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998), whereas others suggest that structured reflective writing promotes the qualities, skills, and motivation required for effective reflective practices (Telfer & Knowles, 2010). Both cases reported in this paper built upon the methods successfully employed in previous research (e.g. Cropley et al., 2007; Gadsby & Cronin, 2012; Knowles et al., 2012) by adopting different structured approaches to reflection that were driven by a process of questioning. The rationale for this being that a structured, written process provides a powerful pedagogical resource that supports the development of critically reflective practitioners (cf., Gadsby & Cronin, 2012). Consequently, although reflection is complex and relational, structuring the process scaffolds learning of the reflective process, nurtures critical thinking, and promotes reflective insight. Whilst it is recognised that individuals should be given the opportunity to adopt an approach to reflection that allows them to explore their experiences naturally to permit creative thinking, in the beginning stages of introducing reflective practice structuring the process encourages more systematic reflection and reduces the likelihood of individuals simply pondering over their experiences (Knowles et al., 2001). Due to the variety of structured approaches available, practitioners must consider which one might be best suited to the client they are working with. Indeed,

different situations are best supported by different reflective practices and, therefore, the practitioner must consider the purpose of their clients' reflections in order to ensure the efficacy of the process (Cropley & Hanton, 2011).

One factor, reported in both cases here, which influenced the success of the reflective interventions, was the development towards a reflective disposition. In the first case, the cricketer reflected both on their own and with the ASP practitioner. In facilitating reflective practice in this way the cricketer was able to consider his approach to reflection as well as begin to understand the types of information he needed to attend to. This approach has previously been considered as key to encouraging greater immersion in reflective approaches to practice (Griffin, 2003). Additionally, in the second case study, the team were not only supported by the coach but also by their peers through the integration of a shared reflective process and the use of feedback. In both cases, this support was ongoing and not isolated in nature, which researchers have acknowledged as being fundamental to encouraging sustained reflective learning and thus developing a culture where reflection is seen as a vital part of professional practice (Anderson, Knowles & Gilbourne, 2004; Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998). Practitioners utilising reflective practice as a mode of intervention with athletes must consider, therefore, how reflection becomes part of an athlete's disposition rather than being viewed as a tool to be used when the athlete feels it necessary (Ghaye, 2011).

Although the cases presented here do not represent the diverse landscape of applied sport psychology consultancy, they do provide specific insights into both applied practice and the utility of reflective practice as an approach to enhancing athletic performance. Whilst it is difficult to identify the potential cause and effect relationship between improved reflective skills and performance, the social validation procedures adopted in both cases provide strong evidence of the efficacy of the inter-

ventions. Indeed, Kendall et al. (1990) have outlined the importance of social validation as a way of verifying the results of an intervention. It is believed that the findings from both case studies, therefore, offer unique insights into the value of reflective practice for athlete populations. Due to the scope of these cases there is still a need for future research to develop the evidence base supporting reflective practice in sport and upon which effective reflective interventions can be developed. Indeed, despite the perceived benefits associated with reflective practice, its use within the different domains of sport appear inadequate and this may be because practitioners are still questioning these perceptions and its value (Cropley & Hanton, 2011). Nevertheless, given the findings presented in this paper, coupled with the extensive support from both inside and outside of the sporting domain, it is recommended that ASP practitioners carefully consider the potential that reflective practice interventions can have for the holistic (e.g. performance, health, well-being) development of their clients. In doing so, practitioners must also consider the way in which they help their clients to develop the skills to reflect and facilitate the reflective process rather than taking for granted that the benefits associated with reflective practice can be gleaned simply through engagement.

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