

The Performance Profile: Theory and Application

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The importance of discovering the athlete's perspective of his or her own notions of self and performance is discussed with reference to Personal Construct Theory (Bannister & Fransella, 1986; Kelly, 1955). The athlete's constructions are displayed in the form of performance profiles and the methodology of developing such profiles is described. The application of performance profiles is illustrated with a number of examples from elite athletes over a range of Olympic sports.

Much has been written in recent years about the content and delivery of psychological skills training to athletes and coaches. However, while the content and actual delivery of such services frequently varies, the process that underlies delivery seems to remain fairly constant. This process has been made explicit by Boucher and Rotella (1987) and Thomas (1990). Typically the sport psychologist negotiates the aims and objectives with the performer, undertakes a subjective analysis of the requirements of the sport, performs individual assessments of the athlete, implements a brief education program, provides appropriate training in psychological skills and techniques, and evaluates the effectiveness of the program.

Although the performer is involved in this process, as in many models of professional behavior, the roles assumed by the sport psychologist and the performer most closely resemble those of the doctor/patient relationship. This is particularly the case at the assessment stage of the process, when sport psychologists typically employ questionnaires, structured interviews, and behavioral observation to arrive at a judgment of what the performer's needs are. Admittedly, the sport psychologist may then explain these conclusions to the performer (the education phase) in an attempt to convince him or her that they are worth acting upon, but generally the performer is forced to assume a relatively passive role in the decision-making process.

This situation is at variance with the empowering philosophies professed by most psychological skills training programs (e.g., Gauron, 1984; Orlick, 1986).

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At best the approach leads to the sport psychologist's being frequently faced with the problem of convincing performers that they really need to work on some particular aspect of their psychological preparation. Furthermore, according to the locus of causality principle of Deci and Ryan's (1985) Cognitive Evaluation Theory, such externally controlled events are likely to weaken intrinsic motivation for engaging in psychological skills training and thereby lead to problems of adherence (Bull, 1991).

The present paper describes an approach to this problem that is becoming increasingly popular among British sport psychologists. Devised and developed by Butler (1989), performance profiling is a natural application of Kelly's (1955) Personal Construct Theory to sport psychology. The fundamental premise of Personal Construct Theory is that individuals strive to make sense of the world and themselves by constructing personal theories. These lead them to anticipate what will happen in given situations, and subsequently their theories are either validated or revised in light of how well these theories enable and guide them to see into the immediate and long-term future (Bannister & Fransella, 1986).

What underlies the personal meaning is the continual detection of repeated themes. The discriminations that individuals make in their endeavor to make sense of the events that surround them are called constructs. These may be experienced verbally or nonverbally but always take a bipolar form; thus by perceiving oneself as tired there is an implicit denial of freshness, alertness, or energy. Personal Construct Theory emphasizes the uniqueness of construing in that each individual differs in how situations are perceived and interpreted, what is considered important, and what is implied by his or her particular construing of the event. Such a notion has important implications when two or more individuals are pursuing a joint goal, either specified or assumed.

Helping the performer achieve his or her potential is the premise underlying both the coach/performer working relationship and that of the sport psychologist and performer. How coaches decide to accomplish this will, for the most part, depend on their interpretation of the performer's current condition and the levels they believe the performer can achieve by the time of competition. From the standpoint of Personal Construct Theory, the coach might be viewed as construing the behavior of the performer. However, when the coach and the sport psychologist are able to begin construing the construction process (or perspective) of the performer, then decisions regarding coaching methods would be palpably more relevant to the needs of the performer.

Personal Construct Theory invites us to view the performer as in the business of constructing often quite an elaborate theory of his or her condition—physically, technically, tactically, and psychologically. The performer will employ this theory to enable courses of behavior to be charted in relation to it. However, as Ravenette (1977) has suggested, such construct systems are built up and maintained at a low level of awareness. This implies that in endeavoring to discover something about a performer's construct system, we must invite the performer to explore and communicate that which he or she is already taking for granted. Exploring the performer's perspective thus enhances his or her own awareness and enables the coach and sport psychologist to discern something of the performer's perspective.

The repertory grid (Beail, 1985; Fransella & Bannister, 1977) prevails as the principal method of facilitating a person's construct system. Since constructs

do not form a chaotic jumble but are related into an integrated system, Kelly (1955) proposed the repertory grid as a means whereby the mathematical relationships between constructs could be obtained. The grid is a matrix through which an individual assesses a series of events (e.g., types of playing conditions) against a number of constructs. Fransella and Bannister (1977) provide a comprehensive description of methodology and interpretation of the repertory grid.

To date, the application of repertory grids in the sports sphere has been limited and reports in the literature appear nonexistent. The attraction of repertory grids lies in eliciting that which is important to the performer, in contrast to tests or questionnaires that plot the performer against axes chosen by the sport psychologist. It frees the performer to construct a picture of himself or herself in terms that readily make sense, rather than forcing him or her to respond on predetermined measures. It avoids for example the perplexed performer faced with a list of questions, seeking to know "what does bewildered mean?"

The repertory grid does pose a predicament for the sport psychologist faced with a mass of computer printout, however. The amount of information in terms of correlational analyses, principal components, cluster analysis, significant relationships, and so forth hardly does justice to the data offered by the performer. It places the sport psychologist at least one step away from the original information and encourages interpretation of the data rather than an understanding of the athlete.

In the sporting context, Butler (1989) sought to adapt the repertory grid by mapping the performer's personal construct system onto a performance profile. This paper aims to describe the method of performance profiling and reflect upon how the approach has been applied across a variety of sports. Originally developed within amateur boxing, the performance profile has now been employed within field hockey, gymnastics, ice skating, judo, modern pentathlon, speed skating, track and field, and weight-lifting. The rapid spread of performance profiling across a number of sports has arisen because coaches have recognized its potential in enhancing their understanding of the athlete. For the sport psychologist, this method offers a welcome extension to the more customary methodologies employing questionnaires and behavioral observation.

The Basic Method of Performance Profiling

Stage 1: Introducing the Idea

The idea of performance profiling is introduced to the athlete as a means of shedding light on how he or she is currently feeling about his/her preparation for competition. Examples of completed performance profiles are shown to the athlete to illustrate the basic procedure. It is emphasized that there are no right or wrong answers but that the technique instead attempts to uncover what the athlete considers important. It is pointed out that the information provided on the performance profile may improve the athlete's own awareness and will, when shared with the coach, help to direct the training in areas of perceived need.

Stage 2: Eliciting Constructs

Constructs that the performer perceives as constituting the fundamental qualities of elite performance are elicited. When working with squads, such constructs

have been generated through brainstorming in small groups. Essentially the groups are asked to consider, "What in your opinion are the qualities or characteristics of an elite athlete in your sport?" Working on this for 5 to 10 minutes generally produces a broad range of qualities that are then shared with the whole squad. It would seem most likely that inviting a former elite performer who commands the squad's respect to facilitate the discussion of important qualities would enhance this process still further (Gould, personal communication, July, 1990). The task for the performers is then to select those qualities that are considered important for them, taking into consideration their own style.

When constructing performance profiles with individuals, the same question is addressed, often with some assistance in generating a broad range of constructs. Thus the performer might be invited to describe the qualities that mediate the different ways other performers might cope with certain situations. For example, the athlete might be asked to contrast the qualities of two performers he or she perceives as coping differently with the event.

Stage 3: Assessment

The performer assesses himself or herself along these constructs and the scores are presented on a visual profile. For each construct considered important, the performer is encouraged to rate how he or she currently perceives him/herself. Further details of the procedure of performance profiling can be found in Butler (1991).

The following examples illustrate the basic procedures involved in performance profiling and should give some indication for the different ways in which performance profiles can be used. Figure 1 shows the physical performance profile of a weight-lifter during the initial stages of preparation for the 1990 World Championships. As a group, the weight-lifters were asked to brainstorm qualities that they perceived as important constituents of an elite performance. These qualities were categorized in terms of physical, technical, attitudinal, and psychological characteristics and were profiled accordingly.

Figure 1 shows the physical qualities one weight-lifter selected as important for him from the list that was generated. When constructing performance profiles, it is important to retain the labels generated by the performer (Bannister & Fransella, 1986), since the profile then accurately reflects what the athlete perceives as important in terms of executing an elite performance. This perception may or may not be at odds with what the coach and sport psychologist consider important.

Following his selection of qualities, the weight-lifter was asked to rate himself on a 0–10 scale anchored with "not at all" and "very much" for each construct. Note that only one end of the construct requires labeling in this exercise of profiling. The first rating obtained from the weight-lifter was as he regarded himself at that moment, "now". It is displayed on the profile as the shaded area. A rating of 10 is at the perimeter of the profile, and ratings become progressively lower toward the center. A second rating, "top performance," was elicited by asking the weight-lifter to consider one of his best performances over the last 12 months and rate it on the various qualities.

This profile provided immediate feedback to the performer and his coach as to how he viewed his physical and mental condition, as well as what might be realistically achievable during that phase of his training cycle. The profile indicated (a) the areas the weight-lifter felt he needed to develop in order to perform

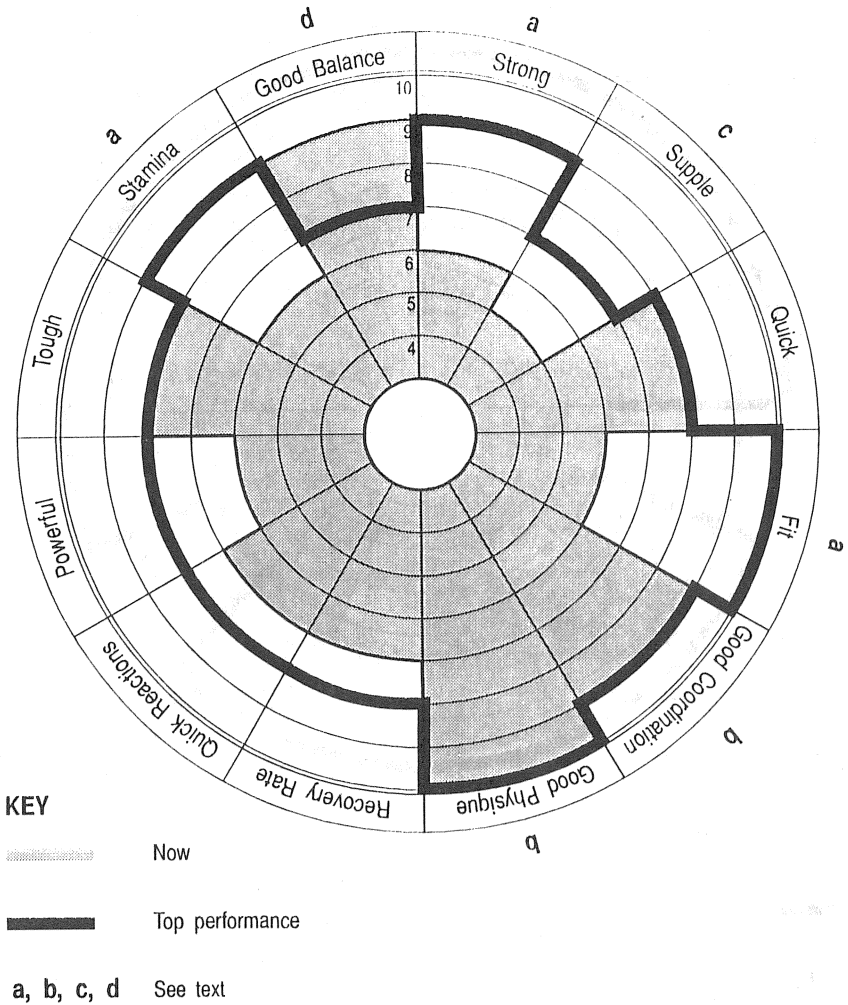


Figure 1 — Physical performance profile, weight-lifter.

at his best; (b) those areas he perceived as stable and characteristic of him as a weight-lifter; (c) where a top performance had been achieved despite perceived weaknesses (low rating of top performance), thereby possibly suggesting areas upon which training might focus in order to pursue an even better performance; and (d) aspects of his performance that he perceived were already in advance of the requirements of his best previous performance.

Figure 2 shows the technical performance profile of an amateur boxer in preparation for the 1988 Olympic Games. In addition to the "now" rating, the boxer was also asked to consider how he would ideally wish to be. This display of an "ideal" on the profile enabled the following information to be gathered: (a) areas of perceived strength, (b) areas of desired change, and (c) areas resistant to change.

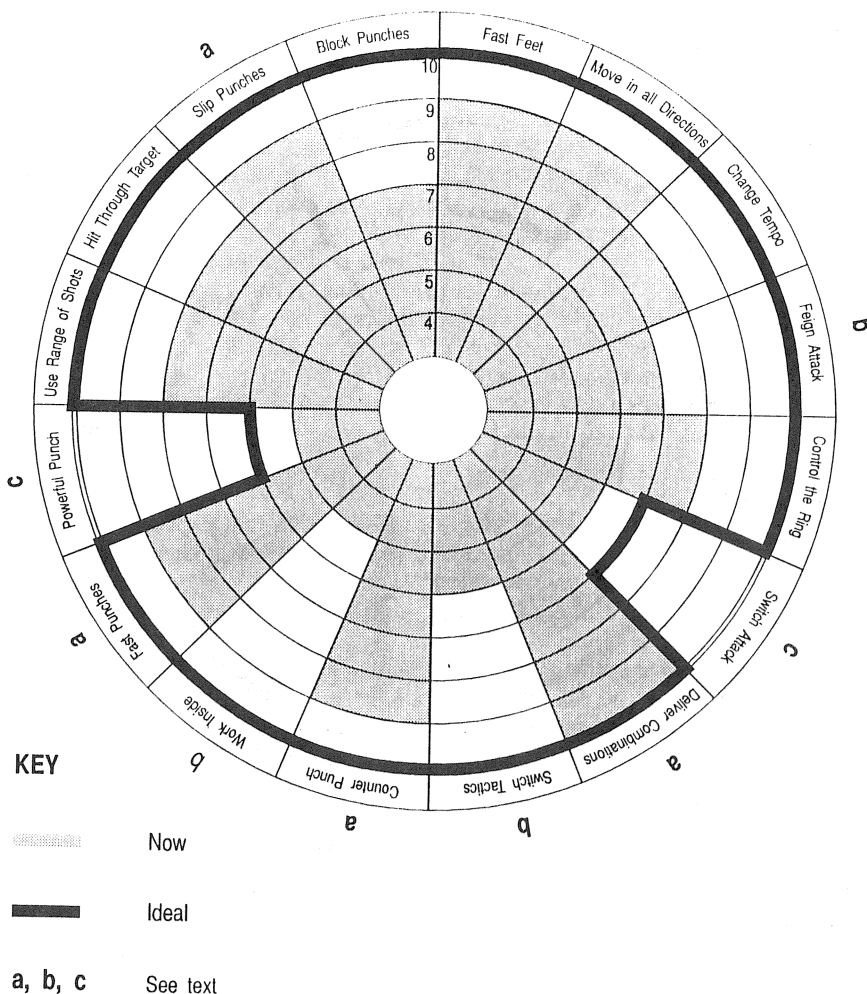


Figure 2 — Technical performance profile, amateur boxer.

The areas of desired change reflected a large discrepancy between “now” and “ideal.” With this boxer, feints, switching tactics, and working inside were felt to be particularly important areas to work on. Feedback of this information to the coaches enabled them to direct the training program toward fulfilling the boxer’s perceived needs. Coaches now use these profiles ringside during sessions of pad work so that both coach and boxer are engaged in the pursuit of agreed-upon goals.

Areas that might be termed resistant to change are marked with a (c) in Figure 2. For his ideal, the boxer attributed a low rating to the constructs concerned with switching attack and possessing a powerful punch. Thus the boxer might resist efforts to develop such qualities. This clearly had implications for the coach who might otherwise become increasingly frustrated by the boxer’s continual

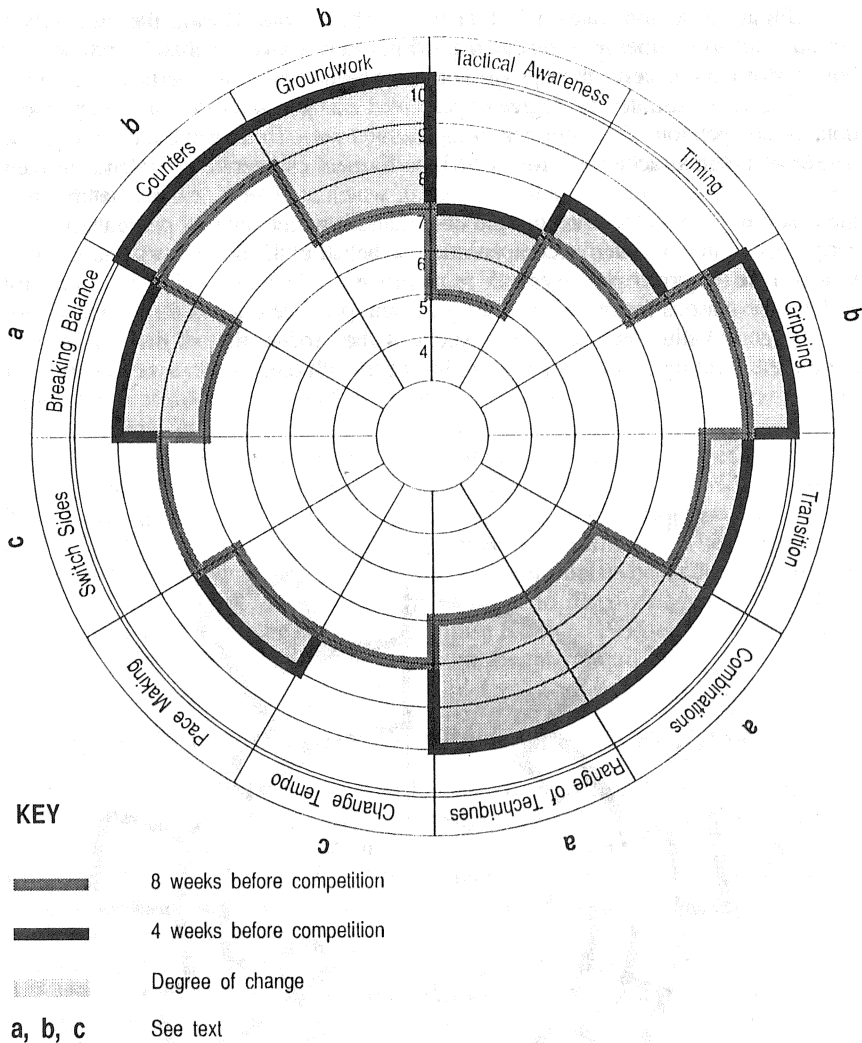


Figure 3 — Technical performance profile, judo player.

lack of development in this area. Why an athlete might resist working toward that which others consider to be an ideal deserves investigation.

Tschudi (1977) proposed a formulation for understanding this implicative dilemma, which essentially rests upon seeking the perceived advantages of not changing and the perceived disadvantages of changing. For this boxer, the problem with switching attack was the possibility of leaving himself exposed, and the problem with having a powerful punch was his perception that this would require gaining weight and consequently detract from one of his major assets, a fast punch. Coaching in this instance became one of developing power (through technical modifications) while preserving the speed the boxer regarded as important.

Figure 3 demonstrates a further use of the profile. During the preparation period prior to competition, repeated profiling may prove a valuable indicator of how performers perceive their progress toward their ideal or top performance state.

Figure 3 illustrates the degree of perceived change for a judo player in preparation for competition. The information highlighted by such a profile includes (a) the degree of progress achieved, from which performers can derive confidence in their preparation; (b) accomplishment of the ideal, which may be a positive statement of the performer's self-assurance (on the other hand it might suggest, particularly at an early stage of training, an overcompensation on behalf of the performer); and (c) areas in which the performer perceives little or no progress. Here the ensuing dialogue must address the reasons for this lack of progress and possible options for its resolution.

Figure 4 illustrates a further aspect of the profile, that of displaying both the athlete's rating and the coach's rating of the athlete. In this case the amateur

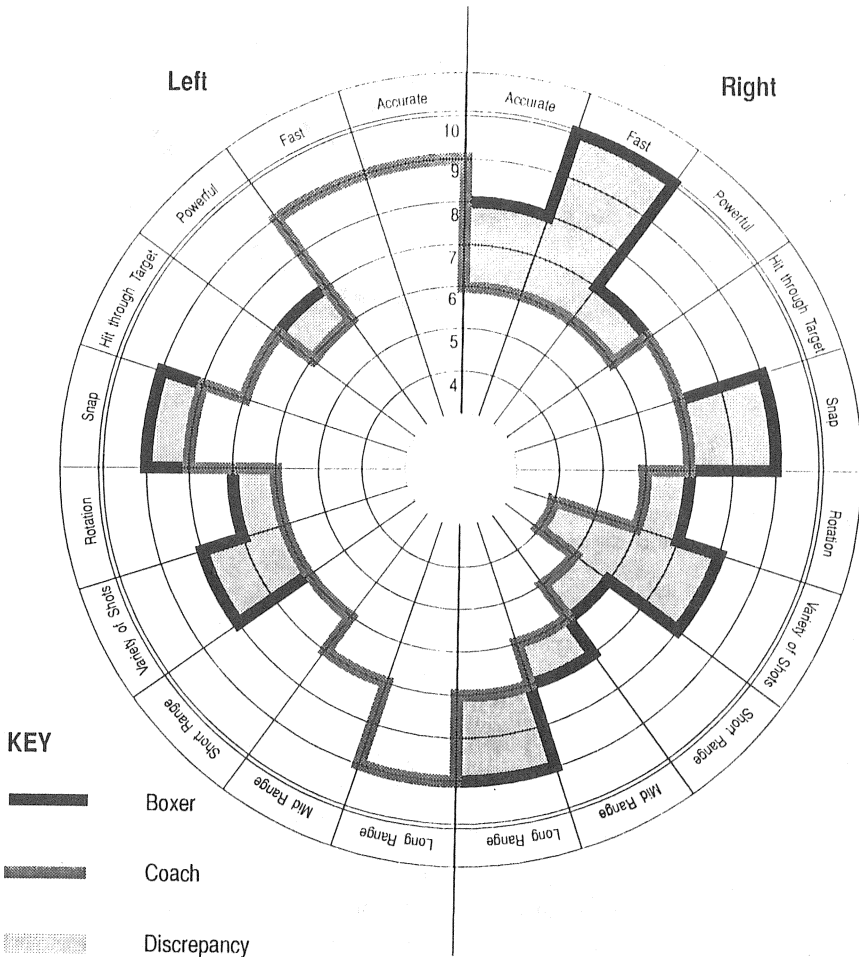


Figure 4 — Analysis of punch performance profile, amateur boxer.

boxer was preparing for the 1990 Commonwealth Games and the profile was undertaken to analyze his punching performance. There were areas in which both boxer and coach were in agreement, in particular the perceived need to develop power in shots and a belief that the relative absence of rotation and hitting through the target may be contributing to the weakness. Because of this agreement, coaching designed to modify such a weakness became fundamentally driven by compatible notions of change.

However, there are also the almost inevitable discrepancies of opinion between performer and coach along some constructs. Figure 4 shows a generally greater discrepancy between boxer and coach when considering right arm punches than when considering left arm punches. In particular, the mismatch is greatest with respect to the variety of shots, speed, snap, and punching at long range. Indeed, the boxer perceived the speed of right arm shots to be at an ideal level, which was considerably at odds with the coach's observation. The boxer might therefore consider speed work unnecessary.

To work in harmony, the discrepancy of opinion must be reduced. Encouraging performers to become active observers of their actions through video analysis, biomechanics, or feedback of results can enhance their understanding of the coach's perception. As with the profile, we have come full circle. The performance profile not only enables a performer's self-perception to be understood by the coach but, reciprocally, it enables the performer to discover something of how the coach construes him or her. To paraphrase Kelly's (1955) sociality corollary, we engage in effective coaching when we begin to understand each other's construction processes.

Other Ways of Using Performance Profiles

Performance profiles do not have to be displayed as circular targets. Figure 5 compares part of an international figure skater's ideal profile with the profile her trainer perceived as ideal. As one might expect, in general there was considerable agreement between the skater and her trainer on the relative importance of the various qualities the skater identified. However, there were also three areas of obvious discrepancy: the relative importance of anaerobic endurance, imagination, and originality.

Figure skaters are required to perform a short program of approximately 2 minutes duration and a long program of approximately 4 minutes duration, with various combinations of powerful jumps and spins. Furthermore, this particular skater was only 16 years of age. Consequently, it seemed likely that the skater did not fully understand the physiological demands of her sport and that she would benefit from an educational program that demonstrated the fundamental principles of anaerobic endurance and training.

The other major discrepancy hinged on the importance of originality and imagination. This is perhaps an issue the skater, her trainer, and the squad's choreographer should explore in some detail, since originality and imagination appear to be a fundamental part of any expressive performance, especially at the highest levels. This discussion might also make use of video films of elite and not so elite performances, with a judge explaining to the performer exactly how points for artistic impression are won and lost in each performance.

Finally, another area in which performance profiles may have some potential is team cohesion. Research by Yukelson, Weinberg, and Jackson (1984) indicated

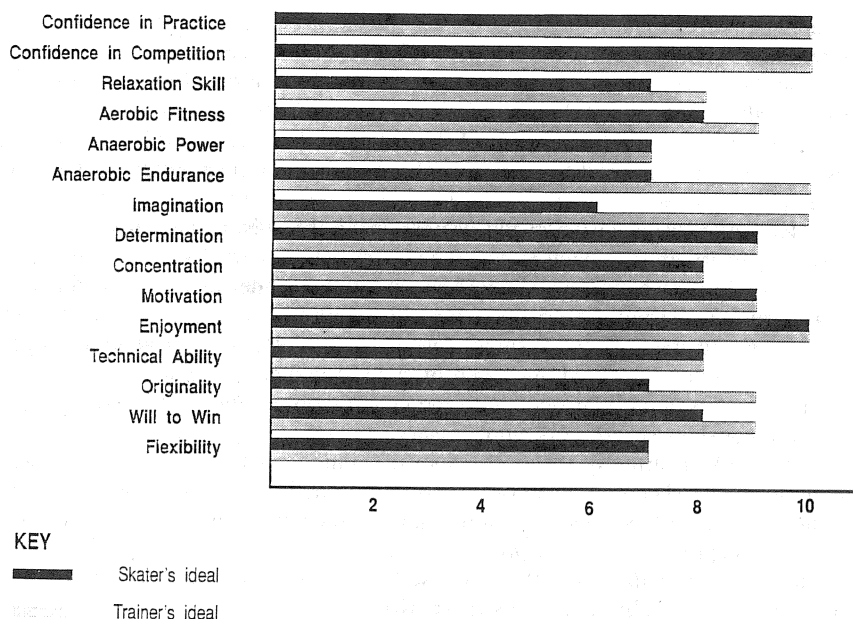


Figure 5 — General performance profile, figure skater.

that four factors underlie team cohesion: attraction to group, unity of purpose (e.g., clarity of team goals), quality of teamwork (e.g., role compatibility), and valued roles (e.g., role valued by the rest of the team). On the basis of these findings, it would seem that the individual members of a functionally cohesive team should have similar or at least compatible ideal performance profiles. However, despite the apparent reasonableness of this hypothesis, empirical evidence to support it has yet to be produced.

Conclusion

Performance profiling has generated extensive interest in athletes, coaches, and sport psychologists in Britain, and it is now being employed routinely in some sports in order to monitor the athlete's perception of his or her preparation for competition. Theoretically it is based on the principles of Personal Construct Theory, and as such it takes the perspective of the athlete as fundamental. Presenting the athlete's notion of him/herself as a visual display gives clear and easily digestible information to both athlete and coach. The process leads to enhanced awareness, which for the athlete can form the basis of goal setting. For the coach and the sport psychologist, an awareness of the athlete's view may direct the future design of training and coaching in physical, technical, and psychological areas.

A unique feature of the performance profile is its construction of an analysis framed in the athlete's own words and designed by his or her own selection of what is considered important. It is thus athlete oriented and athlete specific.

Therefore care must be taken to ensure that an athlete's perception of a certain quality is compatible with that of the coach and/or the sport psychologist.

The performance profile has enormous flexibility and can help coaches and sport psychologists understand their athletes in several respects: (a) areas of perceived strength, (b) areas of perceived need for improvement, (c) the athlete's vision of what constitutes a top performance, (d) where the athlete might resist improvement, (e) monitoring progress, (f) discrepancy between how athlete and coach view performance, (g) discrepancy in what athlete and coach consider to be important in producing an elite performance, and (h) analysis of performance following the event.

Performance profiling is essentially an applied measure driven by the principles of Personal Construct Theory. It is hoped that this article might encourage an interest in application and some evaluation of its method. We are presently analyzing the impact of the method and intend to examine, true to the spirit of Personal Construct Theory, how athletes themselves construe the technique and consequent implications.

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