

It's good to talk...

A week in the life of an Applied Sport Psychologist

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SIMILAR to the sentiments shared by Rebecca Symes and Pete Lindsay in their 'A week in the life' accounts in recent editions of the *Sport & Exercise Psychology Review*, it is an honour to be asked to write this article for fellow DSEP members. The first decision to make was which week to write about, as being a self-employed sport psychologist brings markedly different tasks and workload each week. So much so, that there is no typical week. In fact some weeks, I have very little work at all. My response at these times when questioned by friends and family 'do you have much work on?' is usually humorous 'I'm available, but no-one wants to work with me!' After being self-employed for eight years I find this variability less problematic and try to view my workload across a year rather than being overly concerned about short-term inactivity (though it is still testing at times). Not surprisingly, I have chosen to write about one of my busier weeks in October 2014 as I doubt the reader would be interested in my daily routine when not working.

I have recently written at length about my career experiences, influences and reflections (Hemmings, 2014), however, I believe it is important to provide some information about my journey to full-time self-employment. I have been very active in the applied field since 1993 whilst working concurrently in a full-time Higher Education lecturing position since 1996. I received an offer in golf in 2006 to substantially increase my consultancy workload, which led to the decision to leave my university role and go into private practice full-time. With a mortgage to

pay and a family of five to support it was a very anxious time to leave the security of a full-time salary. I negotiated with the university a one day a week sabbatical for one year to act as a safety net should self-employment not prove a success, but since then since I then have built my private practice, working mainly in amateur/professional golf, and also in cricket and motorsport (for case study examples of work in these sports see Hemmings 1998, 2009, 2011). In 2013 after 16 years I stood down from my role as lead psychologist to England Golf to pursue new opportunities as I felt the role was being changed into one where I felt I could no longer be effective. This has led to a significant change in my work pattern as until last year I was working in excess of 40 days a year with the National Governing Body.

I have always believed that the building and maintenance of consultancy relationships (Katz & Hemmings, 2009) is central to the effectiveness of a sport psychologist and indeed to all of my work with clients. Therefore, I would like to try and convey how I approach relationships, and give an opinion on the challenges of self-employment rather than just describe the content of my role. In doing so, I hope the reader can appreciate my values and beliefs, my style of consulting, and how I approach the uncertainty of self-employment. I recognise other sport psychologists may have alternative views and operate in markedly different ways so I merely aim to describe my experiences. I have recently been reading *On and Off the Field* by Ed Smith, a diary of a professional cricketer's season that won the *Wisden* book of the year in 2004. In the book's introduction the author reflects

on how much he should reveal about himself in writing the diary. '*A preparedness to be vulnerable may be admirable and even attractive as a human quality, but scarcely normal in sport... allowing yourself to be known, letting the guard down, is a risk... how much to say, how much to trust, how much to give? These questions keep coming back*' (p.ix). I feel I face similar dilemmas as I begin this account; yet keeping my 'guard up' would make writing this diary a waste of time.

Monday

The start of the week brings three meetings to attend across the day, but none will bring financial remuneration. The first 9.30 a.m. meeting is at a local hotel with an associate who works mainly in the business and executive coaching setting. He approached me in the summer about running a joint one-day workshop in 2015 for business clients to bring a sport psychology dimension. Income generation is an ongoing issue in my self-employment as one might expect, and this workshop offers a good financial incentive. I have successfully run BPS Learning Centre Approved masterclasses and golf psychology conferences since 2002 and am now experienced at the administrative, organisational and logistical aspects of such events. However, having not worked in the business/corporate setting I have to be explicit about the skills I can bring and how preparation tasks are shared. In the meeting we discussed possible dates and costs as well as the content of the day and I was cautious about making a final decision on the extent of my involvement. On my mind are two issues; firstly I am not overly interested in working in the corporate setting, and secondly, I am not certain I have the high level contextual intelligence in that domain (see Pack, Hemmings & Arvinen-Barrow, 2014). Yet the financial motive is clear in terms of self-employment, and I trust my associate. This aspect of a professional relationship is very important if I am going to collaborate with anyone in a new venture. I leave the one-and-a-half hour meeting clear

on my position and the steps that follow to progress the idea.

I drive a short distance for a second meeting and lunch with the chaplain of the professional cricket club I have worked for since 1997. David Chawner is a retired Baptist minister, chair of the charitable organisation Sports Chaplaincy UK (SCUK; www.sportschaplaincy.co.uk). David is hugely experienced having worked extensively in professional rugby union, and co-organised the multi-faith chaplaincy services at the last rugby world cup in New Zealand. A few years ago I became a Christian and learned of the excellent support chaplains can provide in professional sport. SCUK have some very famous coaches (e.g. Sirs Alex Ferguson & Ian McGeechan) who endorse the chaplain's often misunderstood role and it was the work of Revd. John Boyers, the long-time chaplain at Manchester United who established the organisation which works extensively in football, cricket, rugby union and league, horseracing and motorsport. The role of a sport chaplain is to provide voluntary pastoral and spiritual support (pastorally *proactive* and spiritually *reactive*) to all at a club (i.e. coaches, players, support staff, administrators, supporters) and in my opinion there is considerable overlap with the role and skillset of a sport psychologist (see also Gamble, Hill & Parker, 2013, for a discussion on the interaction between chaplains and psychologists at Premiership football clubs).

David had moved to Northamptonshire a few years ago and I approached the head coach about securing a role for him at the cricket club. Consultants who work in cricket will be familiar with the high suicide rates in retired cricketers and also the mental health problems reported by current cricketers have become publicly known in recent years through high profile media cases. The English Cricket Board run a funding audit of sport science and medicine provision at professional clubs each year and recently there has been new criteria established to include psychological well-being. I am only

budgeted for 100 hours contact per year at the club (they are not a wealthy club) and hence David is able to pick up on numerous pastoral issues with coaches and players in my absence, and provide a collaborative 'wrap-round' care to help minimise mental health difficulties in the playing staff. The players have a very good relationship with him and the club has benefited from his caring, sensitive and impartial presence. I recently read that players at Hearts F.C. nicknamed their club chaplain 'Charlie' (Chaplin) as a sign of his acceptance into the environment, and I know from conversations with several cricketers at the club that they hold David in warm regard. Our regular meetings allow us to 'catch up' on events over the last couple of months and today we also conduct an informal review of our work across the recently ended season. There is growing literature examining spirituality and sport psychology (e.g. Maranise, 2013; Sarkar, Hill & Parker, 2014; Watson & Nesti, 2005) and I have had many conversations with David about the role of faith in my work, and the increased presence of faith in professional athletes. I noted in a recent *Sunday Times* interview I gave on sport chaplaincy that sport psychology research has come from a secular perspective and largely ignored faith in athletes. In many sports in this country, for example, there is now a proliferation of Latin American, European and African athletes where spirituality is central in the life of the player. In my opinion, sport psychologists need to better understand the relevance of faith to fully serve the needs of these athletes. I also believe that professional sport is now so commercialised and highly pressured, and as a consequence many more incidences of mental health problems, addictive behaviour, marriage and relationship breakdowns are occurring. Chaplains can be an excellent free resource to help identify and support individuals experiencing difficulties.

I am early for my next meeting at The University of Northampton, which is only half-an-hour drive away. I am a member of

a professional practice group meeting on a bi-monthly basis during the academic year. In 2011, I was instrumental in bringing this group together to discuss current issues in sport psychology consultancy and applied practice, give conference/workshop attendance feedback and report research progress. This group is made up of 10 sport psychologists and trainees of varying experience and backgrounds. At this particular meeting Drs Natalie Walker, Jonathan Katz and Nichola Kentzer present an excellent project on which they have collaborated. Following their attendance at the AASP conference in Las Vegas to present the same project, the team showcased their innovative online educational resource for problem-based learning in sport psychology. This resource was created to help develop graduate sport psychology practitioners and the meet the pedagogical challenge of preparing students for the 'real' world of sport psychology. The development team felt there was a need for an interactive problem-based learning programme to facilitate reflection and development of applied practice skills. The team developed a bank of learning scenarios faced by trainees and practising sport psychologists and created an online resource as a method for developing consultancy skills, case management, ethical dilemmas, reflection and assessment in sport psychology. Using Articulate Storyline software and mixed method animations, the team created a tool to help individuals consider alternative actions, challenge accepted views and stimulate critical and analytical thinking. The session delivered to the professional practice group demonstrated how the tool was developed, outlined the challenges faced, and provided an opportunity for the group to engage with the resource in real time on laptops and for the team to receive feedback to further aid the development. (For those who wish for more details please see the development blog: <http://performancereflections.tumblr.com/> and/or contact natalie.walker@beds.ac.uk for more information and to request access

to the resource.) Often being self-employed means working in isolation and whilst this meeting did not bring income, the professional practice group presents the chance to continue to have discussions and learn from others. The group has established close and supportive relationships and provides a great climate to improve as practitioners. I particularly enjoy hearing about the successful work of the group in projects in which I am not involved, and today was one of those occasions.

Tuesday

Today's first task is a Skype call to South Korea at 10 a.m. In 2010 I redeveloped (after initial work with Dr John Pates) an online education course, the Golf Psychology Coaching Certificate (www.golfpsychologycoaching.com) which is an approved education programme of the PGA of GB&I and the PGAs of Europe. I was contacted in 2012 by a South Korean coach, Yong Hee (Richard) Lim, who wanted to establish the course in his country and this led to the course being translated into South Korean in 2013. Despite some early language difficulties we now have a great collaborative relationship. Last year I was fortunate to spend a week working in South Korea (a very surreal experience) and Richard has visited the UK on three occasions. The call is to discuss his progress in establishing a residential course in South Korea and to aid his communication with the British PGA to arrange a UK visit for several South Korean coaches. In some ways, developments over the two years have been slow and I am mindful that some of the work I do goes unpaid. This kind of work has no contract, we just have a simple 'letter of agreement' to formalise our relationship. However, I feel the collaboration is worth the time investment and believe that long-term it promises to be fruitful. I have also met some wonderful South Korean people through this relationship.

The rest of the day is largely spent on administrative tasks. I have recently announced a masterclass in golf psychology

for January 2015 to be jointly run with Dr Richard Cox and I process some bookings and answer some email communications about the day. After initial apprehension back in 2010 when I first thought of the idea, I have really enjoyed delivering these BPS Learning Centre approved masterclasses in sport and golf psychology. During these days I am able to present finer aspects of sport psychology delivery that may not appear in the literature, which in my opinion, is often too much about 'techniques' rather than the 'process' of consultancy. It was Richard's idea to run the day together and I have been privileged to get to know him well over the last three years. Again, the theme of relationships comes through here. I am happy working on my own, but also believe I thrive when working with other sport psychologists with similar values.

Other communications are emails around the BPS Stage 2 group and individual supervision programme I run jointly with Jonathan Katz. Jon and I have known each other for 17 years and he brings huge excellence to supervision with his sport and counselling psychology qualifications and experience. We have six great people as candidates on the programme and each have specific strengths and particular supervision needs. Stage 2 is a costly business for candidates in training and Jon and I are mindful that our programme delivers in a professional way, and, therefore, preparation for supervision meetings and ongoing support and communication with candidates is high on our agenda. I am also actively involved in research through a Research Fellow position at St. Mary's University in Twickenham (since 2008). Today offers the chance to liaise over different ongoing research projects. Being employed on a 0.2 fte position means I have to be careful with time spent on research activities and not commit to unmanageable collaborations or tasks. Again, in terms of relationships, I have been really fortunate to work with some excellent researchers in recent years such as Drs Steve Pack, Denise Hill, Rick Hayman, Christian Swann and Adam Nicholls.

The final task of the day is also part research-related; a Skype call to the US to speak to a former PhD student, Dr. Monna Arvinen-Barrow at The University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. Monna's career has gone from strength to strength and she is now internationally known for her work on the psychology of sport injury. Whilst she was a student under supervision our relationship was clearly formalised, but since her graduation in 2009 Monna has been kind enough to include me in her ongoing research and I have really enjoyed seeing her flourish. We have also become great friends and my wife and I visited her in Milwaukee in 2013; so the call is to catch up on her work and our collaboration, and also to hear news of her family life.

I should mention that I have been working at home in my office. I do not have an external office and typically meet clients for consultancy sessions at a local facility where I can book small meeting rooms when necessary. Of course, home working brings the normal challenges of distractions and procrastination. I am fairly self-disciplined, but not adverse to reading newspapers and internet searching instead of working.

Wednesday

This morning was meant to be spent locally in a consultancy session with a golfer on the European Tour with whom I have enjoyed a 12-year working relationship (since he was aged 15 on an England squad). He asked to postpone at late notice (Monday) as he was extremely tired after a few hard weeks of playing schedule and arriving home from a long-haul flight from Singapore. In my time being self-employed I have not had to use or mention cancellation charges as it has rarely been an issue. This postponement has left a space in the diary unfilled and I accept the loss of income, however, the meeting has been re-arranged for the following week so thankfully that income will be deferred. In the context of working relationships it has proven wise to be flexible in late cancellations/postponements, but to be ready to

challenge individuals if I feel I am being disadvantaged. I use the free time this morning to go to the gym.

I have an appointment to give blood in the afternoon. I first gave blood in 2011 after seeing one of my daughters require a blood transfusion after a major back operation the year before. There was no need to include this here, but it was part of my week so I decided to mention it. I give blood every 16 weeks and the entire appointment only takes 30 minutes. I would encourage all to consider giving blood as stocks are always needed.

Three days of the week have passed and most work so far is developmental. No pay as yet, though I am salaried for my research work and all Stage 2 candidates pay supervision fees in quarterly instalments.

Thursday

The busiest day of the week. I leave home at 8.30 for a 9.45 a.m. start and a day of eight individual sessions with year two students at a golf academy in Derby which is an hour's drive up the M1. The Performance Golf Academy (www.performance-golf.co.uk) was created by the ex-performance director for England Golf whom I have known since 2001. The students at the academy are aged 16 to 18 and typically single handicap golfers. The two-year programme consists of 50 per cent of the week studying for a BTEC in Sport Performance at Derby College of Further Education and the other 50 per cent is on golf education, coaching, practising and tournament play. I see each player for 45 minutes once a month during the academic year. I really enjoy this work with the young players and the academy is now in its seventh year of operation. The players are not elite and are unlikely to establish playing careers, and the content of the sessions is varied and challenging. For instance, as well as practical golf-specific content, the young students often present with issues such as homesickness (some are residential living away from home for the first time), bullying, dropout, adherence to studying, relationships, future

career steps, and balancing part-time employed work, study and golf. I believe that having just left school is potentially a great time in their lives and having two daughters of a similar age keeps me mindful of the developmental and growth issues the students' experience. The practicalities of running eight sessions back to back with a short lunch is tiring, but interesting. I am also paid well for the day. There are many similar golf academies linked to further education colleges in the UK and potentially offer great work opportunities for qualified and trainee sport psychologists.

I leave at 4.30 p.m. and head straight back to a bereavement counselling session about seven miles from my home. I am a trained volunteer with the charity CRUSE (www.cruse.org.uk). The one-hour session is with a recently bereaved widow in her home who lost her husband of 28 years very suddenly to lung cancer. The work is rewarding and I have met some very resilient people in challenging circumstances. I suffered a significant bereavement in my childhood which I believe drew me to the role, and I mention the volunteer work as I am sure it has helped me to become a better practitioner. The bereavement support training I undertook adopts a person-centred approach which differs from my normal cognitive-behavioural support to athletes. I feel experiencing a different approach of providing support to individuals has equipped me with additional skills and greatly enriched me as a person.

The final task of a long day is a consultancy session at 7.30 p.m. at the local hotel. This is highly unusual for me as I would not typically make myself available in an evening. However, a professional golfer I am working with has been playing a tournament in Surrey and is on his way home to Liverpool. As we were aiming to have a meeting in the next week it seemed practical for him to stop en route home rather than make another four hour round trip in the near future. The work with this particular player has gone really well (it doesn't always!) and we have

struck up a great rapport very quickly. We review his recent performances and chat through his upcoming challenges at tour qualifying school in November.

Friday

Work is another day at the Performance Golf Academy in Derby, though this time with eight year one students. It is a repeat in terms of format, but more challenging as it is only my second session with each of the year one students. This means my relationship with each golfer is in its infancy and I am mindful of developing rapport (I have personally found that talking about favourite football teams is a useful rapport builder) and 'getting to know' them, discovering their background and strengths, as well as identifying any current challenges they are facing.

The Weekend

Like any other working professional, work-life balance is highly important to sport psychologists (Waumsley, Hemmings & Payne, 2010). I have had the misfortune to experience depression and some of this mental health difficulty was due to a poor work-life balance. I took the decision two years ago to rarely work at weekends (after some golf consultancy finished), though if I am travelling abroad this is sometimes unavoidable. This decision felt like a risk and narrows my earning potential as a self-employed person when many opportunities in our field can come at weekends; however it is one I have not regretted. This weekend involves going to The Hawthorns with my elder brother to watch West Bromwich Albion play Crystal Palace in a Premier League football match (he is an avid Palace fan). The rest of the weekend is a mixture of spending time with my wife and three daughters (the eldest Harriet, 19, has just left for university, Katie, 16, Natalie, 14), attending church and a long bike ride. Having an office at home, mobile phones and email readily accessible, means 'switching off' from work is never straightforward particularly as

a sport psychologist's work involves thinking and reflection. I am getting better at it.

To finish, I hope the reader has been able to discern my emphasis on the importance of relationships in our work. The successful long-term associations I have had with multiple athletes, coaches and organisations have come about through maintaining and investing in human relationships, focusing on others, showing you care and yet not becoming over-involved, and a sustained professionalism rather than a particular personal excellence in delivering sport psychology 'techniques'. Many athletes comment that I am a great listener, and this skill should not be underestimated when trying to build effective relationships with all clients.

Finally, I have not wanted to create a picture that self-employment is without significant challenge. The UK has been in or just out of a recession for over six years and finance is sometimes tight. Earning sufficient income to support my family in some months can be a concern. I have found that I enjoy the flexibility and autonomy of self-employment, however, the more challenging aspects of working for yourself are increased isolation and uncertainty. Eight years into private practice I can say that this uncertainty has diminished to an extent, however, like the experience of so many professional athletes with whom we consult, uncertainty is always there.

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