



Working with sport psychologists

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ABSTRACT

In this joint article, Alistair Higham examines the benefits and challenges for coaches of working with sport psychologists and introduces how he worked with Sport Psychologist Julie Blackwood in the lead up to the World University Games in South Korea last year, where GB won a Gold and a Silver medal. Julie then recounts her work in more detail to offer further insight into some of the ways in which coaches can work effectively with sport psychologists.

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INTRODUCTION

It's all in the mind. Decision-making, creativity, expectation, pressure, concentration, emotional control ... I could go on. In fact, I will: winning ugly, raising your game, determination, perseverance, seeing an opportunity, varying your tactics, relaxing, remaining positive ... it's all in the mind. Well, where else would it be?

I think most coaches recognise the vital role the mind plays in winning tennis matches. Many things we say as coaches to players during matches have a psychological aspect Stay with it', 'Dig in', 'Find a way', 'Keep trying', 'Concentrate' 'Right here, right now'. However, for some reason, sport psychologists are not seen as physical trainers, they are seen as physiotherapists. The perception is that they fix things that are broken. We accept that physical trainers will develop stronger muscles, we should accept that sport psychologists will develop stronger minds.

And therefore, I have always looked for ways to work with sport psychologists. And early in my career, I was lucky enough to begin a close working relationship with Dr Chris Harwood, which exists to this day. Amongst early discussions on Momentum and Match Flow, it became obvious that working with a sport psychologist who knew tennis, was much more about building a mindset than the commonly held misconception that you only need a sport psychologist if something requires fixing.



BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

I continue to work closely with sport psychologists, currently with Ana Soares on how players understand The Journey of the Match (see next edition for her latest report on Turning Points in Tennis) and Julie Blackwood in her role as Sport Psychologist

for the GB student team. In my experience, there are a variety of benefits to working with sport psychologists. These benefits are not only for the players in a programme, but also for the coach. A sport psychologist can:

- Be an excellent sounding board for the coach's own ideas/coaching behaviour
- Clarify questions a coach may have on the best way to prepare players
- Make suggestions for improving the effectiveness of drills and skills by incorporating a psychological element
- Challenge the coach in a supportive way
- Help create a team ethos which is valued by the players
- Provide an independent and safe place for the players where their thoughts and feelings can be voiced without consequences

Equally there can be some challenges to working with sport psychologists:

- Expense. Time with players and realistically what impact can be made unless it is a longer-term relationship
 - Coaches think they take care of the psychology
 - Sport psychologists can operate in mental areas in isolation
 - Sport psychologists are professionally bound to retain confidentiality if agreed with the player
- Therefore, to maximise the benefits and minimise the challenges, I would suggest that coaches:
- Work with a psychologist who knows tennis or is willing to work collaboratively to learn
 - Work with a university to identify a potential candidate who has recently qualified
 - Choose initiatives/ activities that involve all the players, are easy to implement
 - Have both team and individual aspects to the support
 - Make psychology practical by having definite time periods and resources produced

CASE STUDY

The GB student tennis team, supported by the Tennis Foundation*, excelled at the 2015 World University Games, bringing home Gold and Silver medals in the Men's and Mixed Doubles respectively, from the second largest multisport event in the world, behind only the Olympic games. As Great Britain Team Manager for the event, I employed the services of Julie Blackwood, a Sport Psychologist who had qualified and played at Loughborough University, and who the Team Coach Barry Scollo and I worked closely with in the run-up to the event. The remainder of this article is Julie's account of her role as Sport Psychologist in supporting the team's preparation for the event, which adheres to the conclusions highlighted above.

While presented within a team context, the ideas can be easily adapted by a coach for their coaching programme.

INITIAL CONTACT

I became involved with the GB student tennis setup 8 months prior to the World University Games event, attending a preparation camp for the annual World University Masters event. The camp presented an excellent opportunity to meet the coaching staff and players and observe the environment and interactions. Based on gaining knowledge about the players, event and schedule of processes leading up to the games (camps, fixtures, selection dates) from the Team Manager, I developed a sport psychology brief that detailed key areas for psychology support.

At this point it is relevant to note that I remained independent of the formal selection process, in order to maintain open relationships with the candidate players. However, I did actively engage in several discussions with the Team Manager and Team Coach around the influence of different selections on doubles pairings and team dynamics, which served to stimulate reflection and raise awareness to biases and assumptions.



DEVELOPING A TEAM CULTURE

At the second two-day GB student camp in May, I ran an interactive workshop with coaches and players with the purpose of developing a GB Student Team Culture, which would not only be relevant for the upcoming World University Games, but also for future GB students' events (given the wider audience at the camp). The session focused on discussing experiences of team environments that were perceived to have a positive or negative influence on performance. The players' contributions made the session a great success and the players and coaches subsequently each inputted a list of constructs for incorporation within the team culture.

Following the session, I refined the lists into three main themes, which were underpinned by core foundations. The culture was then shared in the form of a medal-shaped graphic (aligned with the goal for the team at the World University Games) and talked through with each team member. I incorporated this into

a team video and the Team Manager was equipped to review the culture in team meetings as required.

INDIVIDUAL PREFERENCE CONVERSATIONS

I conducted telephone conversations with each of the team members in the month prior to the event. Questions included, 'How do you like to be supported?' and 'What is going to be your signature contribution to the team?' From these conversations, I put together a list of bullet points on each team member that was shared with the coaching staff. The Team Coach and Manager remarked that comments on what players wanted from them, such as a preference for positively framed coach feedback, were particularly useful. I also feel that having further individual contact with each player made my in-event support more accessible.

REMOTE SUPPORT

During the World University Games event, I supported the team remotely from the UK. I remained in contact with the Team Manager and the wider team throughout via inclusion on a group message thread, as well as following the team's progress online. While seemingly insignificant, the thread gave me an insight into daily arrangements and developments (e.g., who was seeing the physio) and who was winning the ongoing Boys versus Girls quiz. I was available 'on-call' via Skype, contact through which was encouraged but not obligatory, owed to the busy nature of such events. Once the team had returned home, the Team Manager and I debriefed the event and the preceding journey, documenting the process through reflective practice.

CONCLUSION

We hope this article has provided an insight into some of the ways in which coaches can work effectively with sport psychologists from both sides of the equation. For me, being involved with the GB student tennis team has been thoroughly rewarding experience that continues to this day and I would like to thank Alistair for having the forethought to engage with a sport psychologist in his role as Universities Manager. It's all in the mind... where else would it be?

RECOMMENDED ITF TENNIS ACADEMY CONTENT (CLICK BELOW)



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