Meta-Skills for Sports Coaches

A DISCUSSION PAPER

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Table of Contents

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For many athletes, successful performance will often be attributed to the support, guidance, and encouragement of coaches. Coaches play a central role in ensuring that the inherent capabilities of athletes are optimised and that they are appropriately equipped to respond to challenges both during and after competition. Amongst coaches, this requires a set of skills and capabilities that extends beyond fitness and technique, targeting the psychological and emotional resources of athletes that are crucial for coping with the demands of a sporting career. These 'meta-skills' are emerging as important attributes in determining success on the field and the successful transition to a productive and fruitful life at the conclusion of a sporting career.

This Discussion Paper explores some of the key meta-skills that are emerging as necessary for successful coaching, together with the conditions that might initiate their application. These meta-skills include a capability to develop resilience amongst athletes and assist and guide an appropriate balance between sport and non-sport-related activities. It demands a willingness on the part of coaches to respond to the needs of athletes, particularly through authentic, empathetic social interaction. The propositions are based on a recognition that coaches, like athletes, have different capabilities, share different goals, and have different aspirations that will determine when, where, and how these meta-skills might be applied in a specific context.

Meta-Coaching Techniques

Despite the various approaches to coaching, the broad goal is an emphasis on the potential for growth, development, and the maximising of potential. In this way, coaching in sport is perhaps best characterised by attempting to unlock the potential of athletes to optimise their performance. However, achieving this goal can be challenging and requires the application of skilled coaching strategies. It is more than simply having a conversation with athletes about their performance. Embedded in the practice of coaching are techniques that promote learning, self-insight, and provide the foundation for success.

Models of coaching.

Models of coaching outline the critical features of a coaching conversation that foster opportunities to thrive. For example, the GROW (Goals, Realities, Options and Wrap-up) model assists the coach to work with athletes to move closer towards their sporting and non-sporting goals. The Achieve Coaching Model (ACM) is a seven-step model that provides a structure for coaching sessions to ensure that the coaching relationship with athletes is purposeful, with clearly defined outcomes.

Like the GROW model of coaching, the intention of ACM is to frame goals, identify and evaluate options, and to create plans for action while encouraging momentum. This is similar to cognitive behavioural approaches to coaching that also emphasise goal-setting and motivating behaviour toward goal completion. However, these approaches also pay attention to common thinking styles that both promote and limit goal-directed behaviour. Models in this tradition are designed to support thriving through the development of critical individual capacities while simultaneously addressing self-limiting beliefs or 'performance interfering thoughts' that

can create barriers to optimal performance. When an athlete appears to be experiencing cognitive or emotional barriers to change, cognitive techniques may then be instrumental to enhancing self-awareness and enabling subsequent personal growth and resilience.

Specific coaching skills.

Beyond the overarching models of coaching are specific coaching techniques that serve to engage athletes in ways of thinking that best promote self-insight and growth. For example, successful coaches use a range of tools and activities, including the 'best possible future self' to help athletes envision their full potential or desired end-state.

Coaches can also use techniques to challenge athletes' beliefs about their potential. These beliefs lead to performance-interfering thoughts. By assisting athletes to identify these beliefs, their assumptions can be challenged, and their effects on performance and motivation can be controlled and managed. For example, where low self-esteem is an issue for an athlete, activities that promote self-acceptance can be the key to reducing anxiety and stress.

Inherent in all these techniques is the idea that athletes are driving any change and therefore, are ultimately responsible for their own growth. Evidence-based coaching is designed to ensure that the process of self-discovery is driven by athletes and recognises athletes' personal strengths and expertise in their own life and circumstances.

Understanding the coaching context.

Beyond specific coaching strategies, it is critical to consider the context in which coaching occurs. For example, athletes at different stages of their careers (e.g., early career, mid-career and later career) often have different expectations of the coaching process. However, they also experience different drivers and different situational constraints. Successful coaches recognise both the opportunities and the limitations afforded by the context, ensuring that athletes are well prepared for the demands they might confront.

Coaching Sport-Life Balance for Peak Performance

'Highest-stakes' events are rarely at the beginning of the season when athletes are mentally and physically fresh. Typically, they come after months of intense and gruelling training and competition. Coaches and support staff play a critical role in helping athletes reach these events in exceptional physical and mental condition.

Drawing from interviews with professional Australian Cricketers, there is an acknowledgement of the role of coaches in preparing for the physical demands of sport. However, it is often the mental game that separates the 'good' from the 'great' athletes. The most successful coaches are those who are able to assist players to stay mentally fresh, so they are better at 'switching off' outside training and competition, and better at 'switching on' when it matters. Maintaining this balanced perspective is critical so athletes are not overwhelmed by the sport when the stakes are highest.

Optimising the mental game involves maintaining a rich balance between sport and other areas of life. This balance also helps athletes find the resilience and emotional skills needed to bounce back from setbacks. Like many elite careers, cricket is intensely challenging. Things often do not go to plan. Teams lose matches. Players lose form, are injured, and must cope repeatedly with severe pressure. Athletes must step up at pivotal moments, and also ride the lows, as well as the highs of full sporting careers.

Many athletes balance their sports careers with maintaining or pursuing additional sources of income. For this reason, the phrase 'sport-life balance' is perhaps better suited than the standard 'work-life balance' for a wider number of athletes. Most athletes want to invest '120%' into their sporting goals, especially when the stakes are high. Therefore, coaches and player development staff have crucial but challenging roles in supporting athletes to maintain and sustain a genuine sport-life balance. This not only supports mental wellbeing, but it also improves performance and performance consistency.

The professional Australian cricketers interviewed often reported a strong tension between wanting to devote as much time and energy as they could to their sport, and needing to invest in other activities. Many reported times where being too – or entirely – focused on their sport meant that they started playing poorly. Some sought to train more diligently during performance slumps, but found it left them 'mentally exhausted' and 'unable to recover'. One player noted that, "If I'm entirely focussed on cricket, my cricket is worse"; another said that "when it's not going right it just becomes overwhelming – just having something else out there takes your mind off it and refreshes you".

Athletes noted the impact of travel and heavy training loads on relationships and other areas of their lives and the role of coaches beyond their sporting life. Some athletes found that they performed at a higher level when coaches encouraged the 'full life circle of work, study and family', or simply enabling 'ways of switching off'. Others looked back on points earlier in their careers and observed that coaches who enabled a balance between the 'on' time and 'off' time – between deep engagement in their sport and a full life outside it – meant that they felt better and their performance improved.

Importantly, there is no one-approach-fits-all solution in avoiding the total encapsulation that often occurs in the world of sport. This reality can sometimes bring emotional distress and compromise performance. Coaches need to assist individual athletes to find their own path to what works, and what doesn't, for them.

These strategies might include:

- Teaching athletes how to 'switch-off'
- Designating no-sport zones to encourage conversations about other topics
- Assisting athletes to nurture and maintain positive friendships with whom they can discuss challenges
- Assisting and enabling athletes to maintain relationships outside of their sport so that they can find social support outside that environment when needed
- Assisting athletes to manage a positive family environment
- Encouraging athletes to engage in other activities that they enjoy
- Encourage and enable athletes to 'zone out' at appropriate times

Fundamentally, coaches and support staff need to work within busy schedules to encourage 'off time'. This is time to build strong, positive, and supportive relationships with people outside the sport, and time to engage in other activities that offer a mental break from training and competition, or provide a sense of perspective to manage the highs and lows. It means building a team or training culture that values the positive benefits of mental rest and recovery as much as it does for physical rest and recovery.

A sport-life balance is one of several strategies that helps athletes improve their mental game as much as their physical game. Although it not always easy to shape and fine-tune alternative activities to suit each athlete's needs and interests, it can be time well spent.

Interpreting and Responding to Social Cues

Regardless of the domain, successful coaching requires the ability to tailor an individual's training program to their specific strengths and weaknesses. However, this can be particularly difficult if those strengths and weakness are ever-changing – for example, in the case of an athlete's evolving physical, psychological and emotional state. Being psychologically and emotionally tuned to an athlete helps coaches foster and maintain successful relationships with their trainees, optimising what can be achieved.

However, gaining insight into a trainee's psychological and emotional state can be challenging. Not only are these aspects more dynamic than an athlete's domain-related strengths and weaknesses (upon which a coach would typically focus), but they are also more elusive. Coaches might usefully ask how they can become better attuned to an athletes' psychological and emotional state, particularly at elite levels, where psychological factors can differentiate competitors who are otherwise equally skilled.

One way that coaches can gain insight into an athlete's psychological and emotional state is by learning how to detect, interpret, and respond to non-verbal social cues. Although we often don't realise it, there is a wealth of information about others' physical, psychological, and emotional states that can be gleaned within a few seconds of observing them, even if we previously knew very little about that person.

Research is abundant on 'thin slicing', or the ability to make accurate judgments about the emotions of others, and the nature of social interactions between others, having observed only a very brief 'slice' of the interaction. For example, athletes' posture, their reluctance or eagerness to make eye contact, the tone of their voice, and even the speed and nature of their body movements, can provide insight into their physical, psychological, and emotional state. These all serve as cues that can provide valuable information for coaches, allowing them to identify and respond to potential psychological and emotional issues when they arise, and to tailor accordingly, a training program to optimise its effectiveness.

For athletes to be receptive to training, they need to be cognitively and emotionally engaged. Social cues can indicate, among other things, their degree of engagement and receptiveness to feedback. For example, if athletes appear to be 'off their game', these cues can help coaches determine whether they are distracted, unmotivated, fatigued, or experiencing excessive levels of stress. Being able to accurately distinguish these possibilities is critical in determining how the coach should respond, and how athletes' training programs should be adapted to address the issue/s. This will minimise the likelihood that impediments continue to impact athletes' skill development.

Many social cues are visually-based and can be extracted within a glance. Faces are a particularly rich source of cues about psychological and emotional states, although they can also be misleading. In some cases, facial expressions only provide social cues that an athlete is willing to communicate. Athletes can even produce expressions, at least at a surface level, that are incongruent with their actual psychological and emotional state. For example, in high-performance competition, athletes may deliberately mask or miscommunicate their emotional state to miscue an opponent.

Interpreting accurately and responding to social cues related to an athlete's emotional state can allow coaches to optimise training and performance. Research has shown that individuals' emotional state can have important implications for their cognitive processing, with different emotional states enabling or impairing different processing styles. For example, positive emotional states tend to broaden the focus of attention and facilitate cognitive flexibility and the processing of more global or holistic information.

In contrast, negative emotional states are associated with the narrowing of attention and the adoption of a processing style that is more detail-oriented, where features are processed in relative isolation. Therefore, social cues provide insight into an individual's psychological and emotional state and can inform coaches about athletes' engagement and their willingness and capacity to acquire and/or practice specific skills.

Resilience Training

The varying levels of stressors and adversity inherent in sport underscores the importance of ensuring that athletes retain the capacity for resilience, irrespective of the demands. Drawing on the knowledge and experience in high-performance organisations such as the Australian Defence Force (ADF), it is clear there is a need to develop effective and sustainable resilience-strengthening programs that reduce the risk of mental health issues in sport (e.g., depression and anxiety).

In a recent scientific review, psychological resilience was defined as "a good mental health outcome following an adverse life event or a period of difficult life circumstances". Consistent with this definition, resilience training is designed to prevent the onset of psychological distress when people encounter demands. This is particularly relevant in the context of sporting performance since high performance is inseparable from inherent demands (e.g., failure, psychological pressure). Preventative strategies, such as resilience training, help to ensure that, as far as possible, individuals are equipped with the psychological skills necessary to 'bounce-back' or withstand the effects of a diverse range of stressor experiences that they might encounter both during and outside competition.

Approaches to resilience training and their effectiveness.

Most successful examples of resilience training draw on a combination of cognitive-behavioural strategies, psycho-education, guided practice, and the development of protective factors. Meta-analyses examining the effectiveness of group-based coping skills training have demonstrated moderate to large effects in civilian settings on mental health and wellbeing outcome measures. Of the studies examined, some demonstrated no significant change in mental health outcomes at the initial or longer-term follow-up, while others showed large effects compared to a control group. Even among trials of the same program, the effects of resilience training on mental health outcomes can be inconsistent.

An additional challenge of resilience training has been achieving sustained effects over time. A meta-analysis of 37 studies indicated that these resilience programs yielded significant, albeit small initial effects that tended to reduce at longer-term follow-up (>1 month). However, programs targeting individuals at-risk (i.e., experiencing stress or lacking core protective factors) demonstrated an increase in effectiveness over time. Overall, these outcomes suggest that coaches need to be cautious in simply adopting an off-the-shelf resilience program and need to consider whether it is appropriate and likely to be successful in the context in which it will be implemented.

A unique approach to resilience strengthening.

To address the problem of building capacity for resilience, a new approach at the Centre for Elite Performance, Expertise, and Training has been developed that focuses on resilience strengthening: the Systematic Self-Reflection model. The model is based on the idea that resilience is strengthened over time in the context of stressors and adversity. In other words, stressors and moderate adversity are necessary for the on-going strengthening of resilience.

This new approach draws on an increasing body of research that highlights that exposure to stressors, and even potentially traumatic events, can function to increase resilience to future stressors. Recent research indicates that between two-to-four adversities or traumatic events result in greater resilience, compared with no adversity or more than four events. In other words, the relationship between adversity and resilience is reflected an inverted U-shape, whereby moderate levels of adversity are related to greater resilience.

In the Systematic Self-Reflection model of resilience strengthening, individuals who develop, or eventually develop, the capacity for resilience from exposure to stressors, do something unique. For these people, the experience of initial psychological stress, or a less than optimal stressor response, can become a trigger for systematic self-reflection, an important psychological process that allows the opportunity for resilience-strengthening. Self-reflection is best described as a psychological approach to learning that involves the development of self-awareness and evaluation of one's thoughts, feelings and behaviours that allows one to develop self-insight.

Under the Systematic Self-Reflection model, building resilience involves the use of a single metacognitive skill: coping and emotion regulatory self-reflection. This approach targets the development of three key areas: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-evaluation, and (3) self-development and resilience enhancement. It is an approach that can be integrated seamlessly into the training and development of sporting skills.

Conclusion

Clearly, coaches play a critical role in optimising the performance of athletes both during and after competition. This capability, to ensure the development and ongoing well-being of athletes, requires a set of skills that extends beyond simply identifying and correcting physical technique. It requires an understanding of the needs and goals of athletes, building the necessary psychological resources to ensure that these are available during the challenges that will inevitably confront athletes throughout their careers. Coaching now requires a capability to recognise when and where the need for psychological support might arise, how and when it might be delivered, and how to equip athletes for a life beyond their immediate sporting career.

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