Manchester Metropolitan University

e-space

Manchester Metropolitan University's Research Repository

Please cite the Published Version

MacIntyre, Tadhg, Campbell, Mark and Turner, Martin (2014) From baptism to immersion: how wet should we get in consulting? Sport and Exercise Psychology Review, 10 (1). pp. 65-74. ISSN 1745-4980

DOI: https://doi.org/10.53841/bpssepr.2014.10.1.65

Publisher: British Psychological Society

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/631222/

Usage rights: © In Copyright

Additional Information: 'This is a pre-publication version of the following article: MacIntyre, Tadhg, Campbell, Mark, Turner, Martin (2014), From Baptism to Immersion: How wet should we get in consulting?, Sport and Exercise Psychology Review, 10 (1), pp. 65-74

Enquiries:
If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines)

From Baptism to Immersion: How wet should we get in consulting?

MacIntyre T, Campbell M and Turner M, Sport and Exercise Psychology Review, 2014

Tadhg-

In Ireland, we always like to start a conversation with a *scéal,* the Gaelic word for story. While training in my local 50-metre swimming pool recently I noticed another swimmer in my lane. Curiously, they were only going 15m not 50m, swimming back and forth in the shallow end. They appeared quite anxious and frustrated with this. I asked them how they were getting on and I explained that I was a psychologist and interested in such challenges. She explained that she didn't want to swim out of her depth even though she had done it before numerous times. We discussed the challenge and I offered some suggestions. She briefly followed me towards the deep end but still repeated her truncated swim-cycle but after a few minutes she changed lanes and re-commenced the challenge. Pushing off the wall to start she was swimming as tentatively as before and then suddenly she passed the shallow end without stopping. She continued for the full 50m and returned, performing several lengths in succession. I asked her how she did it. She explained that when in the other lane she looked around and noticed that she was a far more technically proficient swimmer than the others and "If they can do it; I can do it." So this *scéal* brings to the fore the question of *how wet do we get* to be effective consultants? Should we be immersed in the environment in order to provide appropriate support or should we just have been baptised previously? I will now try articulate some of the perils of an immersion approach but firstly let us explore our role as *performance* psychologists.

Professional competencies are fundamental to our role as practitioners and

these are typically augmented by an array of consultant characteristics. Among these characteristics are our sporting abilities and achievements, coaching experiences, and sport-specific knowledge. Are the core competencies in isolation sufficient to be an effective applied practitioner? Intervention programmes have inbuilt mechanisms for contextualising and individualising our support. For instance, an effective needs analysis may bring many of the relevant issues to the surface. Integral to the needs analysis is knowledge of the *cognitive task demands* of the activity. And indeed, other practitioners have articulated the need for understanding the performance environment and sporting culture in terms of *contextual intelligence* (Brown et al., 2005). However, according to practice-based evidence, rapport building and creating trust are often based on the consultants' background in high performance sport either as a performer or coach. Is this perhaps a case of confirmation bias by the practitioners? Do we really need to augment our psychological training with earning our stripes on the playing fields? What are the risks in being a former athlete, former coach or being identified with a specific sport?

Mission *creep* is the tendency for a task (especially a military operation) to become unintentionally wider in scope than its initial objective, and this is the primary risk of a traditional immersion approach. If we have multiple roles (or perceived roles) and are identified as a former sport performer or coach as well as a practitioner, this may blur our practitioner role and potentially expose both our clients and us to further risks. To explain, our roles as consultants can be drastically diluted by well meaning aspirations to contribute a myriad of "solutions" to challenges in the performance environment. An intervention that is focused on performance enhancement can obviously lead to an increased awareness around lifestyle issues and challenges in the organisational culture. However, the independent and critical eye of

the psychologist can become blurred if we respond with equal enthusiasm to all the issues raised by our clients. The worst-case scenario would potentially be a loss of our integrity and expertise in the process of *professional deformation.* In this situation our role is no longer the one we were specifically trained for. For example, we could become a *lightning rod* for selection issues highlighted by the coaching staff and may erroneously fulfill the role of selector rather than psychologist. More commonly, there is the possible risk of "gurufication" whereby consultants are seen as having all the inherent expertise and power, the antithesis of a client or athlete centred approach.

Secondly, to return to the swimming metaphor, the immersion technique, may lead us to be too closely identified with the sporting culture or organisational context. For example, questions like whether we wear the team uniform or not, with whom do we travel or if whether we dine with players or support staff, are all relevant. The potential repercussions of being too closely identified with *team staff* may create a barrier for athletes, reduce your approachability and ultimately hamper your effectiveness. Furthermore, our own sporting experiences, assumptions and prejudices may lead to projecting our anxieties onto the client. The tendency for self-disclosure may be exacerbated in the context of our own experiences in the particular sport.

And thirdly, there is the potential pitfall, if we are working *in situ*, to change the nature of our working partnerships. Working in close proximity with athletes at training camps and on the road can shift our therapeutic alliance from a partnership basis to that of a relationship. Questions that emerge are whether we should be buddies with our clients? And if so, how do we maintain the necessary objectivity to perform our role? In the worst case scenario, we could be over committing to our work role due to the personal nature of the relationships, for example during on-site provision at the Olympics or Paralympics. Lack of self-care or self-management

strategies could result in what has been termed psychology *in extremis,* if we don't focus on limiting our role to sustainable service provision. Risks abound in the deep end. Tread safely, and just dip your toes to start.

Mark-

Hold that image now for a second if you will. A hesitant mostly naked person doing their feeble best to immerse their big toe in the big bad water that is the local swimming pool. Non-commital, shivering and patently new or tense to the situation that confronts them. Now try and picture this same individual confidently delivering expert psychological consultation to the inhabitants of the pool- elite swimmers. For me, this is a bit of a stretch. As Tadhg mentioned earlier, I think a key consideration has to be the performance environment. Do I need to consult in situ? When is it appropriate? How will I approach this (more on this later)? These questions need to be foremost in our thoughts as we decide who and when to work with. Instead I think many of us may consider other elements first. Can I do this work from my office? How many sessions do they need? When will I be finished so that I can book in or plan my next job?

As sport psychology slowly seems to be turning into performance psychology surely a deeper understanding of the performance environment is needed for the field to mature and thrive. Practitioners must be prepared to get their toes wet and grow and develop rapidly from there. As an example I give a coaching incident that happened to me some years ago. In a past life I played professional golf for over five years on various tours. One scenario I came across was where a team of us were introduced to the new coach. He was very experienced and qualified as a coach for

over 15 years. Yet just 20 minutes into our first group coaching session he said things no golfer would ever say- an example being- 'stuff it in close'. Now for non-golfers reading this, this might sound okay or even as a recreational golfer but as an elite golfer my teammates and I thought it very peculiar that he would use such non-golf-like language. After all, *stuff it* implies a real lack of precision, skill and craft, something golfers strive towards through many hours of practice honing their sensori-motor skills. So the net result was that this coach 'lost' the team after getting his golf lingo wrong. How could we expect to be coached from such a guy, we thought? One more thing we tried to do as a reprieve was we asked him to play a round of golf with us. He refused giving some or other excuse. That was it for this coach. No one on the team took any coaching from him and he was out of a job and moving on within months of starting. And all because he didn't have the requisite knowledge of the golf performance context, something all golf coaches should be well versed in.

Maybe this is our problem as a field. Maybe we don't have enough knowledge and performance specific lingo to really cut it with performers. Perhaps this is why many of us have been parachuted into a team for three sessions and thanked and sent on our way again at the end of this small stint. If we can develop our knowledge of the context and really map out the psychological demands of the sport in language and ways that performers readily identify with then perhaps we can develop as a field worth keeping around for longer than the obligatory three sessions (one of them probably done *pro bono)*.

One more observation, my latest sport psychology book arrives in the post. I opened the book and on the front cover I saw a beautiful picture of a golfer hitting a shot in the bunker watched over by his coach. Oh, wait a minute, the book is called 'Becoming a Sport Psychologist' edited by McCarthy and Jones. So the golf-coach-

looking-guy must be a sport psychologist. He is fully involved with his player as we can see. After all he is in the hazard with said golfer. He dresses exactly as a golfer would be dressed. He has the golf cap and golf jacket and wears the expression of a man well used to eyeing up golf shots. So is this the message we should be giving to students and others who are interested in becoming a sport psychologist? You can decide. But what if he says the wrong things like the aforementioned golf coach? Stands in the wrong place? Hopefully, this sport psychologist started on the putting green with client (a veritable dipping of his toes), moved onto the practice ground (jumping in to pool) and now is walking around golf course with performer (deep end, back flips and lots of cool under water tricks). Afterall, we are performers ourselves!

Martin

Why not continue with the swimming metaphor? For me, I find I am most effective when I am the 'outsider on the inside'. I can often be seen floating around in the deep end (on a rubber ring if you like!). While I am clearly in the water, the fact that I am not fully immersed protects me somewhat from some of the perils of full immersion already so eloquently discussed by Tadhg and Mark. In other words, I'll have a splash, *sure*, but would very much like to keep dry. Practically, this means that I almost never professionally align myself with the coaching staff, I remind athletes that I am not a coach, and I set boundaries in my very first meeting with a coach. This may seem standoffish, but it's what works for me in the contexts in which I practice, where the coach is often judge, jury, and executioner. Moving on, *mainly because I may have taken the swimming pool metaphor too far*, there were some key issues raised by Tadhg and Mark that really struck a chord with me, which I will go on to discuss in more detail hence forth.

Tadhg's point about cognitive task demands peaked my interest because this has become a real core component of the work I do with athletes. Much of the work I do is with football players (and Futsal players) and not so long ago I was talking to a goal keeper when I realized that I had no idea what the cognitive task demands of being a goal keeper really were. That is, on the pitch I know that attentional control is key, and that decision making is imperative, but I knew little about the off the pitch factors that make that position so cognitively demanding. I had no idea partially because I have never been a goal keeper, and partly because I simply hadn't thought to ask (*my bad*). Often I find myself asking about the in-performance aspects, and focus a lot of my attention on helping the athlete to figure how to get into their desired state when approaching competition. So, I started by asking very basic questions like "what's it like to be a goal keeper?" What came through most strikingly was the responsibility that goal keepers take on, and the extra stress that this brings, in both training and competitive endeavors. Striving for the perfection they will never reach, knowing that they can make nine saves to 'meet expectations' but if one single ball evades their clutches into the back of the net, they have 'let themselves and others down.' Since I spent time trying to get my head around the goal keepers' mindset, my approach has changed somewhat with the athletes I work with. Typically, after an initial period of psycho-education and skills development, I find that I start to become a provider of support in a non-structured way, where athletes use me as a dumping ground for their stresses and strains so that they don't take these stresses and strains onto the pitch. I tell them to "empty your head", and *that* they certainly do!

In line with changes in my role, I am very happy to experience missioncreep if the direction of that creep is towards extra support for the athletes (and coaching staff), and so long as that creep is characterized by psychological support. I am not

happy giving my opinions on selection, tactics, nutrition, politics, or technique. I am now very careful to make clear to athletes that I am not a coach and when they are talking to me they are in a safe bubble where they can share anything with me that won't get back to the coaching staff. For example, much of my work involves the psycho-physiological profiling of athletes, where athletes will take part in a pressure test before which their cardiovascular reactivity is recorded, essentially telling me whether they are approaching that pressure situation adaptively or maladaptively, which can influence performance. Naturally, coaches want to know which athletes responded well, and which athletes responded poorly. For this reason, I have learned to be very careful in how I disseminate this data. I am careful and very clear to coaches that the data is additional information to be considered alongside many other factors that can pin point areas for which the athletes may benefit from extra support. In other words, to raise awareness about intervention points, not to inform decisions on athlete selection.

I also feel strongly about Mark's comments about knowledge and performance specific knowledge. Mapping the psychological demands of performance and training is vital for me (as I have already discussed) but I want athletes to map that for me. I consider empathy, a corner stone of the athlete-centered approach in our discipline, to be about understanding what the athlete is thinking and feeling from their perspective not mine. Therefore, I place little importance on my knowledge of the sport and its intricate parts and high importance on understanding the athlete's relationship with the sport and the performance environment. How can we expect to understand enough about each sport we work in when the athletes have been developing expertise since they were 5 years old (in football)? I don't know, and will never know, how losing in the final of a cup feels, but I know how failure feels, and I know how it feels to be

nervous, and angry, and depressed. I find I am more effective when I am able to ascertain how athletes want to feel for performance, helping them to learn to control their preferred states so they can feel it when they want it. How should I know how they are supposed to feel? Surely the shared (athlete-consultant) understanding of human emotion is sufficient to produce a bond with a client that goes beyond sporting terminology and slang. *He says nonchalantly, knowing full well that he does most of his consultancy in football, the sport he grew up playing at every opportunity*.

Lastly, I want to share a story that links to Tadhg's comments on "whether we should be buddies with our clients". In my very first sport psychology consultancy contract (with a non-league football club) I adopted a very athlete-centred approach. Because of this, I avoided excessive self-disclosure. One wintery evening I saw one of the athletes at the train station. He saw me waiting too and it turned out that he was heading the same way as me. So I decided to sit with him on our journey. *And what an entertaining journey it was*. We shared stories and anecdotes about our shared home city, growing up, playing football, living the "Brummie Dream". The following week though, I had a one to one meeting with the player and something felt different. I couldn't adopt my professional style when he entered the room. I couldn't get down to business in any meaningful way. I felt like he had seen the "real me" and now he was sitting with the "sport psych me". I realised that I couldn't work with him anymore. Luckily he just wanted a chat and as it turned out, he did not require nor want any formal psychological support. But I couldn't get over the fact that I damaged my professional relationship with this athlete by conversing with him in a manner more appropriate for friendship interactions.

For me, immersion has it limits for sure. I will continue to be the 'outsider on the inside' as this approach helps to me to limit missioncreep, and allows me to work

with athletes in a protective bubble…*a bubble for them and for me perhaps*!

Tadhg

Oxygen is key to clear thought and it too provides a space for us all to operate in. And again, the pool provides further imagery to illuminate our discourse. We strive to ensure our athletes are comfortable in and out of the water. That is the essence of what we do. An elite swimmer I met at poolside recently said "life outside the pool that's the challenge…swimming is what I do well." Paradigms like positive psychology have provided frameworks to guide practitioners as they move beyond the naïve mental skills approaches. Increasingly, psychologists are employing approaches that focus on the person not just the performance. Concepts like 'therapeutic lifestyle changes' (Walsh, 2011) provide explanatory value for the non-specific of interventions which previously operated beneath the surface. Clients will benefit from this broader approach that moves beyond lane one, the pool, the gala, and considers the whole performance environment. However, there are possible risks as we now move into the realm of 'performance lifestyle' and 'life coaching'. The challenge is differentiating our discipline from the other domains, not just professionally but for the consumers (see). Where we can excel, is in our own lane of expertise by disseminating case studies to convey the richness of our work. We have an imperative to advocate best practice, to be an ethical lifeguard for those in high performance and to employ the appropriate language to describe psychological phenomena. Let's start with the lifeguard concept. Psychology has been previously described notionally as swimming against the mainstream (Bandura, 2004) and . Why is that the case in the realm of sport? In high performance athletes, players, coaches, athletic directors, and many sport science practitioners are focused on *citius, altius, fortius*. That is the essence of their being. They too care about mental health, welfare and sustainable

performance. We prioritise these with an "*and performance too approach".* This is a shift from earlier approaches to interventions in our field has emanated partly in an attempt answer the range of issues presenting. Accumulating evidence suggests that the high performance environment may have negative mental health consequences (Brewer & Petrie, 2013, Schaal et al., 2011).Training in the awareness of mental health issues, referral processes and above all, ethical practice within the sport context is paramount (Etzel, 2011). One question that arises is who rescues the lifeguard. That is where peer-support, mentorship and supervision should be a prerequisite for practitioners of all levels. In some respects the graduates of specialised programmes-so called neophyte practitioners-are better prepared than the first two generations of "qualified" consultants. A shifting evidence base and the need to be informed by best practice necessitates all of us to engage in supported reflective practice. Is this the solution we have been looking for? Re-brand as performance psychology so we can focus on the full spectrum of athlete, coach and other contexts?

Notably, this is where those trained in understanding grey matter and its implications have to appreciate the grey of performance sport. I am referring to the blurring of expertise in an environment where a medal around your neck can mean more than any number of qualifications and experience. The beige parchment of our degrees pales in comparison to the sheen of the medals. Its not just that those holding the purse strings are naïve but our training typically leaves us with blind spots in two areas: entrepreneurship and contextual intelligence. Charlatanism can prosper as long as we fail to train our graduates and mentees in these domains (Tod & Lavallee, 2011). Furthermore, the language we use needs to be appropriate to enhance the psychological literacy of the consumer. "Mental Steel", "mental toughness" (corollary is "mental weakness"), "mental fitness", "killer instinct", "clutch" and "choke" (for

choking to really occur multiple criteria are required) are all needless terms which at best dilute psychological knowledge. Inappropriate terminology also open doors for those without the requisite knowledge to gain access as consultants. A mind-game vocabularly accompanied by a sympathetic head tilt can go a long way (See Necessary Roughness). Let us, as lifeguards, avoid language that dehumanises our clients. Together we can advocate for a more sophisticated understanding of psychological processes n sport (see BPS Going for Gold website). And now, let us return to the pool.

Water provides a perfect medium for reflection, both for our clients and ourselves as practitioners but only if we stay still. So do we make splashes with our approach or do we create ripples to shape our clients behaviour? Martin's drip feeding of information to coaches is a strategy that resonates with me. Do we let the client choose? What lane are you in? Do you have sufficient separation from your client and the sport science personnel in the other lanes? Are you going the same direction as your client? Or are you working contrary to their values? Create confidence for them in their environment so they can choose when to change stroke, flip-turn or step out of the pool all together. Know when you are in the deep end too and never swim alone. Peer support is vital. And the fate of our nervous swimmer that I introduced at the start of this narrative-How are they doing? Swimingly. Ultimately, we want our clients to move though both deep and shallow water and treat those two imposters just the same.

Mark

I can really relate to Martins notion of being the outsider on the inside when

working with athletes. I too would try to be the outsider, manoeuvering into a position of influence on the inside as it were. I think there is a real need to outline the process of how we manoeuvre ourselves inside. This navigation may be a critical element to differentiating ourselves and providing a professional platform from which to work from. Of course, being the outsider may not be all positive. For example, since when is being the aloof guy in the corner, not aligning themselves with the coaching staff or the players really that approachable or involved? And how do we suddenly become approachable if we remain slightly aloof and possibly marginalised? Does this not feed the notion that we are not mainstream, swimming against the current as Tadhg mentioned? Do we care? These questions need to be considered in light of our own individual approaches and strategies but there should be a consolidation sought by us as practitioners along the lines of *what works best and for whom*. I think the outsider aproach does feed the notion above and can have negative connotations for us. Hopefully, not too negative in that we might be seen as cowboy-outlaws strolling into town all broody and silent! Another issue we need to (re)consider- If we are to train the next generation of practitioners what guidelines will we champion?

Hopefully, as we can see above, navigating into a position of influence is arguably just as important as what you do when you get there yet I am not aware of guidelines on how to achieve this. While we are on the topic too, going forward implies momentum, and so I pose yet another question- do we as a field have momentum? If we do, then why do we see the need to 'rebrand' ourselves as performance psychologists? Questions worth pondering in my opinion. You see, reflective practice combined with peer mentoring are key components to developing as a practitioner and therefore vital for the field to more fully embrace.

Again I find Martins idea of placing little importance on the knowledge of the

sport he is working in refreshing because as he mentions he values the idea of understanding the athletes relationship with their sport as more beneficial. The process of ascertaining the athletes relationship with their sport *is probably the exact way to build relationships*, *rapport and respect* that Tadhg mentioned previously. How we do this and how we come across (i.e., not too naïve) can be our defining feature as support givers for athletes. It can be a bit of a tightrope walk as we try to be professional, differentiated from others (e.g., gurus, coaches, and so on), naïve yet knowledgeable and arguably most importantly *effective* in the support or interventions we are delivering.

So coming back to the outsider on the inside analogy. Being on the inside is where we can be effective. A little bit like a spy or a politician, the act of being effective is almost a covert operation or the drip feeding notion mentioned by Martin and Tadhg. When on the inside we can exert influence and control over the environment we are working in. Maybe I want to exert control over a team or sporting environment that I see in front of me because many teams, successful ones included are very dysfunctional, negative environments to be in. Maybe we have to covertly influence people because if we told the director of sport or coach what we were observing they might chuck us out the door for fear the team not winning anymore.

Perhaps *influence* is the key word here. A key competency for us should be the ability to influence performers and stakeholders to make more informed, accurate, decisive and better decisions regarding their involvement or relationship with their sport. Afterall, psychological processes and their respective effects on human functioning are why I was drawn into this wonderful field. It is what drew me into psychology in the first place and remains as interesting and relevant for me as ever. We seek to study and understand these processes and importantly for practitioners we

try to apply this knowledge and understanding to working with performers. This is why advocating for a more sophisticated understanding of psychological processes is potentially a very important challenge and opportunity, for herein potentially lies our route to distinctiveness.

Finally, at the end of the day our mission objective has to be to *enable* people to understand, modify, and adapt their thinking and subsequent performance and to be able to evaluate and reflect on a more optimistic and confidence-enhancing footing (or else you might slip and end up in the pool when all you wanted was to remain dry!). And there I was trying not to revisit the water analogy but resisted until now! In finishing I want to reiterate that we ourselves *are performers* and with this comes the expectation that we review *our* performances, correct *our* errors and strive to refine and formalise what works. This will show our commitment to best practice and safeguard the field for the next generation.

Bandura, A. (2004). Swimming against the mainstream: The early years from chilly tributary to transformative mainstream. *Behaviour Research and Therapy, 42 (6), 613-630.*

Brewer, B. W., & Petrie, T. A. (2013). Psychopathology in sport and exercise. In J. L. Van Raalte & B. W. Brewer (Eds.), *Exploring sport and exercise psychology* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: APA.

Etzel, E. (2011). "A Near Fall": The multifaceted challenges to work in sport psychology and intercollegiate athletics. In Koocher, G. & Johnson, B. (Eds.) *Casebook on ethically challenging work settings in mental health and the behavioral sciences* (pp. 241-249). New York: Oxford University Press.

Schaal K., Tafflet, M., Nassif, H., Thibault, V., Pichard, C., Alcotte, M., et al. (2011). Psychological balance in high level athletes: genderbased differences and sport specific patterns. *PloS ONe 6(5*), e19007.

Tod, D., & Lavallee, D. (2011). Taming the wild west: Training and supervision in applied sport psychology. In D. Gilbourne & M. B. Andersen (Eds.). *Critical essays in applied sport psychology* , Leeds: Human Kinetics, pp. 193-216.

Walsh, R. (2011). Lifestyle and mental health. *American Psychologist, 66 (7),* 579-592.

Martin

Tadhg's focus on "the person not the just the performer" encapsulates what I feel should be my focus as a sport psychology practitioner. Part of the reason I have adopted rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT; Ellis, 1957) as a core element of my philosophy of practice is because of its humanistic principles that are applied to the person as a whole. The notion of helping athletes to adopt more adaptive philosophies concerning success, failure, rejection, and poor treatment *in general* is at the heart of what I do. However, I agree with Tadhg about the risks of an approach that can be used more broadly in the context of an athlete's life as well as specifically within the performance domain. That is, REBT can help athletes deal with failure and rejection in sport, but also by changing their underlying philosophies their responses to failure and rejection in other aspects of their life become more adaptive. But the focus is always on the performance context. I take the position that the transfer of mental skills from sport to life is the athletes responsibility and if I help them develop the skills properly I should become redundant, leaving the athlete with the ability to address their own psychological challenges in sport and life using evidence-based strategies. In any case, athletes in my experience do not want to be *in therapy* and do not want a "*counselor*" that will tell them how to live. For the most part athletes want to run faster, go for longer, become more proficient. Therefore, when selling my services I almost never mention REBT and instead adopt user friendly terms such as "Smarter Thinking" (Turner & Barker, in press). A rebrand that allows me to advocate effective strategies without having to address the elephant in the room ("it's called rational emotive behavior *therapy*, but you are not *in therapy*").

To be clear, by helping the athlete to adopt adaptive underlying philosophies about failure, rejection, and ill treatment, their ability to respond functionally to life's

challenges are enhanced. What I speak of may be an example of the shift Tadhg described, where mental health, and indeed strategies that stem from clinical approaches such as REBT, have permeated sport psychology. Sport psychology to me is simply the application of psychology to sport, and this echoes some of what Professor Vincent Walsh talked about in his keynote talk at the 2013 BPS DSEP conference. I am a psychologist applying psychology in a specific context, meaning that I am a scientist using strategies that are supported by evidence from the field preferably, but also from the lab. I am not an expert in sport that has decided to try some psychology, or an ex athlete who can pass on experiential knowledge to inspire athletes. In other words my "contextual intelligence" as Tadhg puts it, is way outweighed by my understanding of the human mind because that is what I have spent by academic and professional life studying. I am buoyed by evidence based practice that offers me a safe and ethical surface on which build my practice.

Luckily, there are many well supported evidenced based psychological skills available to us as practitioners and academics that can be found in the scientific literature (e.g., the cannon, Anderson, 2009), but this information is not always decipherable by athletes and other service users. One of the challenges I have faced with athletes who are very keen on psychology is that there is *too much* out there for them to draw on, especially in this "Google age" where athletes can simply type "performance anxiety" into their search engine and get instant access to hundreds of websites offering guidance on the subject. The problem here is information overload. I worked with an athlete recently who was doing EVERTHING he had read about. Imagery, self-talk, PMR, self-hypnosis, breathing exercises, the list goes on. In the absence of professional guidance he threw in everything including the kitchen sink in the hope that something would help him conquer his nerves. Sadly, the result was

poor perceived efficacy for these poorly leaned techniques and consequent feelings of helplessness ("I've tried it all and nothing works!"). He needed someone to take the time to teach him the 'right' skills properly. In the same way, as practitioners we can also suffer from information overload and we have to learn to make the right choices *with our clients* from the vast array of effective psychological strategies we have at our disposal.

The ability to make the right choices alongside the evidence based philosophy I speak of was instilled in me through the superb supervision I received as a trainee sport psychologist from Dr. Marc Jones and Dr. Jamie Barker. Tadhg and Mark rightly highlight the importance of peer support in staving off charlatanism and malpractice, and I pass the guidance that was offered to me encompassing an evidence based philosophy onto up and coming sport psychologists. I submit the psychological strategies I advocate to athletes to the same treatment as their maladaptive thought processes: is it based on evidence, is it logical, and what will it help the athlete? Only if the answers to these questions is yes will I proceed with a given approach.

I want to move on to pick up on some of Mark's points about getting into a position of influence. I often find it useful to think about how I would feel if I was in receipt of my own services. As an athlete, what would annoy me most is the sport psychologist acting all chummy with coaching staff and athletes, using "the lingo" for the sake of using "the lingo", and pretending to know what being an elite athlete is like. Carl Rogers stressed the importance of genuineness as a core competency in building strong client-practitioner relationships (Rogers & Sanford, 1984), and in line with this, I feel that I need to be genuine with myself about what I deliver. For example, are the psychological techniques I advocate to teams and individuals good

enough? Or do I need to position myself as a guru (as Mark put it) to increase the efficacy of the techniques, in which case it is difficult to separate the mechanisms from placebo? Does it matter as long as what I advocate works? This last question is a big question, its divisive and I am too early in my years as a practitioner to answer it. I take Mark's perceptive point about the outsider approach having potential negative connotations, but it may be more damaging to teach sport psychologists how to obtain a position of influence, if they do not have the appropriate skills to deliver effective psychology when they get there. But this is a double-edged sword. If I do not have the skills to fully integrate and become influential, then who will listen to me and take on my guidance?

A phenomenon I have witnessed in academies I have worked in is that you only need initial buy-in from a cluster of influential athletes. If the work you do with them is honest and effective, word will soon spread to the rest of the team. When a critical mass of the team is receiving one to one support, the dynamic between you and the team changes. There is a mutual respect that has been forged through the sharing of deeply personal information, and the genuineness and discretion that underpins our work. When this happens, I feel immersed, but immersion is not the goal. The goal is to help athletes A, B, and C adapt to the performance environment, which then encourages athletes D, E, and F to seek support. Influence is gained through developing professional relationships and doing good work with individuals. I too feel, as Mark strongly asserted, that influence is key, but add the point that influence can be achieved in many different ways. If I am able to influence the athletes, coaches, and support staff I work with to respond more adaptively to the performance and training environment, then I feel I have done my job.

I don't want a soap box to stand on so that all can hear me, I want to use

professional bonds with individuals to influence the way they think, feel and behave in the hope that they develop a sense of control over their approach to performance. One more controllable within the seemingly uncontrollable sporting context. *Apologies for not continuing the swimming metaphor*.

Andersen, M. B. (2009). The "canon" of psychological skills training for enhancing performance. In K. F. Hays (Ed.), *Performance psychology in action: A casebook for working with athletes, performing artists, business leaders, and professionals in high-risk occupations* (pp. 11-34). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Ellis, A. (1957). Rational psychotherapy and individual psychology. *Journal of Individual Psychology*, *13*, 38-44.

Rogers, C. R., & Sanford, R. (1984). *Client-centered psychotherapy*. In H. Kaplan and B. Sadock (Eds.), Comprehensive textbook of Psychiatry. (pp. 1374-1388). Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins.

Turner, M. J., & Barker, J. B. (in press). Using Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy with athletes. *The Sport Psychologist* (accepted 4th May 2013).