**SPP Coaching and Philosophy Statement**

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**Sport and Performance Psychology Philosophy of Coaching and Service Delivery**

**Introduction**

What follows will be an overview of my academic and personal journey of growth throughout my time studying for my Masters the Sport and Performance Psychology (SPP) program at UWS. In this paper I will give an overview of my personal values and core beliefs which inform my work as a performance consultant. I will discuss the theoretical paradigms that I align with and the mental skills training interventions which I will utilize when working with athletes. This review also highlights a.) my continued commitment to uphold the highest ethical standards, b.) my continuing education on concepts of multicultural issues and diversity, and c.) the developmental appropriateness within my work as a consultant.

**Core Beliefs and Values**

My goal as a consultant is to encourage athletes to achieve performance excellence and seek greatness in sport in a way that is authentic to them. What does performance greatness mean? To me it is made up of many different facets. Greatness can be demonstrated both in the face of defeat and when winning and therefore is not just about winning, but rather about being at your best in a particular moment. Greatness does not just come from pure talent, but it requires diligent, focused work on all aspects that the sport requires. Greatness requires focus on detail and technical skills, and a willingness to work diligently and consistently even when at times there is little or no tangible progress. These are values that I was taught by my parents growing up. Furthermore, greatness is displayed in the ability to deal with criticism and setbacks and losses and the ability to come back from those both stronger and having grown through the challenge and proving resilience and mental strength. This is a belief that I developed through teachers and mentors overtime as academic and athletic setbacks or difficulties started to challenge my belief that all that was needed was talent and hard work. Another really important component that I want to remind athletes who I work with of is that longevity in a sport and continued success is testament to the athlete’s love and passion for the sport, winning or not, and the joy they get from playing, which requires an abundance of intrinsic motivation and also the alignment of their values with what they wish to achieve.

My definition of greatness has expanded overtime. When I was younger and playing sports in high school I based my definition of performance excellence on diligent hard work alone, but I also felt that unless I could perform to my perfectionist standards there was no point to me continuing to invest time into training. This led me to a place where I tried out and played many different sports, nearly always being able to perform to at a respectable level but fearing failure I would lose interest overtime. It was not until I had coaches and mentors at university, who instilled in me a sense of self-awareness of my perfectionism and who supported me through setbacks and challenges that I developed a better understanding of what it means to be a great performer and that failure is part of the journey.

Therefore, working with athletes on self-awareness, helping them develop their intrinsic motivation, helping them find ways to work through setbacks and regain confidence and focus, whilst not forgetting about remaining authentic to their own core values, is what informs my theoretical orientation and the interventions I use with the athletes I work with.

**Theoretical Orientation of Performance Excellence (TOPE)**

My own personal philosophy, my upbringing and life experience guide my views about where greatness and performance excellence come from, I see my TOPE as more transtheoretical/integrative than based on one singular orientation. Having worked with athletes as a coach and in the physical rehabilitation field I have found myself drawing mainly from cognitive-behavioral, humanistic-existential, and socio-cultural paradigms. I see these paradigms as separate entities but also as interconnected. Some clients may respond better to one particular approach than another. I view my clients as part of a larger socio-cultural network that can influence their performance, and I do not think I could just ignore the impact that their cultural background and society at large can have on them. The cognitive-behavioral paradigm focuses on the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors around performance. I see this as an important driver behind performance and performance related issues. Lastly the humanistic existential thinking also appeals to me as I see self-determination theory (SDT), especially autonomy, reflected in it. An athlete’s drive, motivation and performance can be heightened by making autonomous decisions and help them to reach self-actualization and reach their full potential. SDT can, through exploring their values and aligning their actions to their values, aid athletes in fining more meaning in their endeavors. Finding this purpose can help enhance their performance.

. As a consultant I therefore want my clients to understand that they are in control of their own progress and growth and of creating their own interpretation of greatness. I want to encourage clients to develop awareness to be able to realize when a change is needed that allows them to continue working towards performance excellence. According to SDT (Cotterill et al., 2017) psychological health is predicated by fulfilment of the psychological needs of autonomy (perception that actions and decisions are volitional), relatedness (perception that actions and roles are valued by wider social circle) and competence (the perception that actions are efficacious). Lourenco et al. (2022) state that the satisfaction of those basic psychological needs and autonomous motivation may be linked to positive behavioral results and positive perceptions of performance in a sport environment.

I find certain aspects of cognitive behavioral therapies (CBT) useful when working with athletes such as cognitive restructuring and reframing of unhelpful thoughts and dysfunctional self-talk as I recognize this behavior from athletes that I already work with. As per Arvinen-Barrow and Walker (2013) CBT aims to challenge irrational beliefs and reframe issues by using cognitive restructuring techniques, scaling feelings and exposure. I can recognize the benefits of cognitive-behavioral interventions depending on the athlete and the issues they are experiencing, as these kills can enhance both performance and well-being (Gustafsson, 2017, Gustafsson & Lundqvist, 2016).

The theory of rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) for example, thought of as the original form of CBT (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018), suggests that in response to adversity, dysfunctional emotions, and maladaptive behaviors stem from irrational beliefs, while functional emotions and adaptive behaviors stem from rational beliefs (Deen et al., 2017). Deen et al.’s (2017) study indicated that REBT used in elite squash players led to less irrational beliefs, more flexible thinking and improved self-reported resilience in the athletes and a study by Turner (2016) indicated that REBT has been shown to be a useful tool to support athletes’ mental health and has been shown to reduce irrational belief in athletes, with less clarity on direct effects om performance.

I also strongly believe that self-awareness and the ability to control what is in our control whilst being able to let go of emotional states that are not helpful to our mental health and performance is dependent on a more mindful and in the present moment approach. Third wave therapies such as acceptance commitment therapy (ACT) and mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT) build on cognitive and behavioral theories but rather than just teaching to control thoughts, these therapies draw more from Eastern traditions of noticing and accepting emotions and subsequent behaviors (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018).

In fact, mindfulness acceptance and commitment interventions (MAC), based on ACT and specifically used with athletes can optimize performance by a present-centered, non-judgmental awareness of inner and outer stimuli, where these experiences are seen as impermanent events that come and go in the ongoing stream of consciousness. In addition, a general attitude of acceptance is employed towards all mental and emotional states. The MAC approach also targets external attentional focus on task-relevant stimuli rather than attention on internal processes. Additionally, using MAC, the athlete needs to be deeply committed to their sport; all chosen behaviors and actions should consistently be in line with personal values and, accordingly, support athletic goals (Josefsson et al., 2022). This approach to mindfulness and commitment to change brings me back around to my humanistic-existential approach and the value that I place on SDT as they are reflected in the practice of MAC. According to Josefsson’s study (2022) this approach may be superior to using mental skills training alone for athletes. Furthermore, a study by Gross et al. (2018) in female collegiate athletes indicated that the use of MAC led to greater increases in sport performance over time, as rated by their coach, when compared to the mental skills training group. This is certainly a technique that I would like to delve into more in depth and improve my practice in post my graduation.

I plan on learning how to apply motivational interviewing (MI) more intentionally in the future as I feel that it covers much of what I value in my theoretical orientation, such as humanistic existential and cognitive behavioral aspects. I have employed aspects of MI into my work as a rehabilitation specialist and coach, however more on an intuitive rather than an intentional or strategic basis. MI aims to encourage the client’s autonomy in decision making where the consultant acts as a guide, clarifying strengths and aspirations, listening to concerns, and boosting a client’s confidence in their ability to change. It helps clients work through their ambivalence about behavior change and to explore discrepancy between their current behavior and their goal behaviors. Autonomy support is a key component of MI. It involves the practitioner creating an environment that supports the athlete’s autonomy and self-determination.

Mack et al.’s (2019) case study showed MI to be a valuable approach for practitioners to adopt when working with an athlete who is skeptical or resistant to begin building a professional relationship and get the athlete to the point of being ready for mental skills training. It also seems a valuable approach when ambivalence or resistance arises over the course of the professional relationship, i.e., during a phase that athletes may find particularly challenging and it has been shown here that MI can be successfully integrated with at least one dominant mental skills training intervention (Mack et al., 2019).

**Ethical Foundations**

In my consulting practice, I will be guided by the ethical code principles and standards created by the Association of Applied Sport and Performance Psychology (*ETHICS CODE: AASP Ethical Principles and Standards | Association for Applied Sport Psychology*, n.d.-b). The AASP requires that as a consultants I must: 1) have sufficient knowledge, skill, judgment, and character to practice competently and work within the remits of my competence 2) respect human dignity and freedom of the client(s), 3) apply the principles of beneficence by contributing to client’s welfare and nonmaleficence by avoiding or minimizing harm, 4) am aware of and respect professional boundaries and the implications of multiple relationships, 5) practice informed consent before any intervention, and 6) maintain client confidentiality, amongst others.

On a personal level when I work with athletes on a physical rehabilitation basis and from a mental skills point of view, I need to ensure that I am clear about my role and the relationship with my client and what service that I provide. Working closely in an environment with other coaches and physical therapists I need to ensure that a client’s confidentiality is maintained that my role in the team is clear and that we avoid, where possible, any conflicts that could lead to overstepping boundaries or lead to conflicting multiple relationships.

I am also aware that I need to practice within my competence as a performance consultant. This means that I need to be ready to involve other therapists in areas where I might overstep my boundaries when t comes to dealing with mental health disorders as this is beyond my remit. McHenry et al. (2021) make a strong point for the appropriateness of providing holistic athlete care that involves both performance consultants and licensed counselors and other mental health care providers as long as there is an understanding of the others’ professional background and competencies. As a conscientious sport psychology practitioner it behooves me to remain at the forefront of developments in my profession. The International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP) for example released an article (Quartoli et al., 2020) that highlights the inclusion of multicultural competence and diversity and inclusion in their ethics code. Aside from keeping abreast of future changes by various organization to their ethics codes I also need to assess each case for any potential ethics conflicts I might encounter to avoid or minimize harm and to be able to communicate effectively with clients, organizations, coaches, and other stakeholders.

**Interventions**

Intervention starts with getting to know the client. This can happen in a variety of ways. Intake forms that are completed and submitted prior to the session allow me to get ahead of the game, especially in terms of being able to be prepared to attend to multicultural and potential ethical considerations. Building a rapport with the client and using motivational interviewing (MI) techniques, such as using open questions, active listening and reflecting back to the client will give me a lot of information about the presenting issues. Mack et al. (2021) in fact state that “this counseling approach appears to have valuable relational and technical components to facilitate the building of the therapeutic alliance, enhance athlete readiness for change, and support delivery of action-oriented interventions in applied sport psychology.” Depending on how relevant to the client, performance profiling can assess the athlete’s strength and weaknesses and at the same time increasing self-awareness and increasing intrinsic motivation and offering a basis for goal setting and monitoring and thereby improving confidence as per Castillo (2022). Furthermore, performance profiling has been adapted for rehabilitation profiling for use with injured athletes as per Arvinen-Barrow and Walker (2013) and could be used as a tool similar to performance profiling in this subgroup of athletes that I am especially interested in. However, there is a current lack of research validating this as a tool. Strength based performance profiling (SBPP) as suggested by Castillo and Bird (2021) can both be used as an assessment and as a strengths-focused application of the performance profiling procedure. The SBPP technique can be used to help athletes, coaches, and sport psychology professionals better understand, assess, and capitalize on existing strengths in preparation for upcoming performances.

After the assessment and carefully considering any ethical or multicultural implications from the case I will conceptualize the case and apply my theoretical orientation to my approach intervention plan. When creating an intervention plan, I want to encourage and empower athletes to work through any setbacks, gain confidence and focus and help them channel their energy through teaching various mental skills training techniques and mindfulness practices. With the input of the athlete, together, we will create an individualized intervention plan that will include learning skills such as goal setting, imagery/visualization, self- talk, creation of performance routines, coping mechanisms, managing performance anxiety and arousal, and breathwork techniques. Working with the athlete as a team will ensure that I create buy-in and adhere to the principles of self-determination theory and supporting their psychological needs. This approach would also help create an atmosphere where I would hope the athlete would let me know when an approach does not work or is not appropriate so that we can implement changes.

I feel more comfortable dealing with individuals over a group setting, I think this may come both from my coaching background in individual sports such as running, triathlon and strength based sports and from years of practicing as a physical rehabilitation specialist. I see this previous experience as my strength, but I will of course consider working with teams as well to help me grow as a practitioner. Ideally, I would like to work with athletes throughout a season or even over a few consecutive seasons, including pre, during, and post season to monitor progress and assess where further progress can be made can be made. This would allow me to track progress over time and assess and reflect on which interventions were more, which were less successful and this would help me to continuously grow as a practitioner.

My professional goal outside of working with athletes is to be able to work both groups of coaches and physical therapists, rehabilitation, and musculoskeletal specialists on educating them and improving their understanding of and their applied knowledge of psychological skills training and coaching methods that improve their clients’ perception of autonomy and competence and thereby improve adherence to rehabilitation programs and improve rehabilitation outcomes.

**Development Appropriateness**

I am planning to work mostly with adults, especially age-group and masters athletes, an age group I am familiar with. I have a special interest in this particular age group as I restarted competing seriously as an athlete in the over forty age group, which opened the door for me to start working with masters athlete as old as seventy years of age, competing at national and international level. There are not many studies available researching the use of mentals skills in older athletes, however Makepeace et al.’s (2021) study showed that masters athletes saw goal setting as of prime importance and they emphasized that imagery benefitted them amongst other things when it came to managing physical discomfort. Furthermore, Makepeace and Young (2021) stated that there needs to be more evidence based research in a group of athletes that require potentially different approaches to services delivered from sport psychology consultants than young elite or youth athletes. Their study suggested that there should be an emphasis on considering a more mature self-concept, values and identity, and the extensive life history as assets. The consultant should ensure more extensive collaboration, with interactive discussion, and a readiness to respond to the client’s inquisitiveness. According to Makepeace and Young (2021) often mature athletes act more self-directed and consultants more often challenged them in applying skills. Sessions delivered were based on considering the master’s athletes autonomy and were geared towards what clients wanted to get out of them, pursuing a problem-focused orientation to consultation.

Despite my experience and niche focus I recognize that I may be asked to work with younger athletes of high school age and for my own professional development I would want to step out of the comfort zone of dealing mostly with adult clients. I therefore need to be aware of age/development appropriateness when it comes to delivering my services. When it comes to working with children, adolescents, and young adults whilst I want to stay true to my theoretical orientation, I need to be aware of the various stages of development and how they impact the individual in the context of playing and competing in sports. The research in developmental psychology has identified a large number of changes that occur from birth to late adolescence in individuals’ psychological status. Understanding and being mindful of developmental appropriateness is critical for lifelong sports participation and development (Horn, 2014).

The Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP) for example suggests positive outcomes in developmental stages such as sampling different sports in childhood followed by specializing years in early adolescence, and investment years in late adolescence (Horn & Smith, 2019). In regard to motivation and self-determination theory Horn (2014) states that children and adolescents progress through a series of stages with regard to the self-perceptual system as well as in their motivational orientation toward achievement. Based on this research, it seems possible that children who specialize early in sport might be negatively affected by exposure to high levels of physical training and the imposition of high performance-based expectations at too early an age. This can affect the development of a healthy/unhealthy athletic identity and needs to be considered when working with adolescent athletes.

**Diversity and Inclusion**

Being aware of my biases and being intentional about diversity and inclusion in consulting is of utmost importance for meeting ethical codes and to ensure that I fulfill the principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence and have the utmost respect for peoples’ rights and their dignity. According to Lee (2019), “counseling services often do not have broad applicability across the range of cultural backgrounds represented by clients.” We cannot assume that the theories of counseling and sport and performance consulting are appropriate for every athlete that we will work with and it would in fact mean ignoring the ideal of providing optimal services for each client. Western based culture and counseling methods emphasize self-actualization, individualism, competition, continual progress, and an emphasis on science and this may not be a culturally appropriate approach for individuals from a non-western cultural background.

Quartiroli and Vosloo (2020) encourage critical reflective practice to help sport psychology consultants to reflect on how who they are may influence their work, work which is not placed in a vacuum and, instead, is situated within wider social structures and power dynamics. This reflective work should remain an ongoing practice. I will acknowledge and bring awareness to any cultural differences and potential issues that could arise with clients from the start of the therapeutic relationship, to create an open and safe space for the client where they feel comfortable to share their own experience without fear of judgment or prejudice.

I fully understand that to maintain multicultural competency I need to commit to continuing my own education and research on culturally relevant topics to continually grow my awareness as a consultant. Intersectionality of various identities that an athlete might have, such as their athlete identity, being black and being a woman, is an emerging topic when considering multicultural competence. As per Schinke et al. (2019) athletes should be viewed as intersectional beings holistically rather than try to tease apart different strands of identity and they suggest that the dominant performance-based narratives should be challenged (e.g., athlete as a monolithic performer) as they are restricting the development of athletes’ whole identities. This view around a more diverse, holistic athlete identity is represented in my theoretical orientation that includes the socio-cultural paradigm. I strongly believe that we cannot support our clients if we ignore their identity or the influence the dominant culture around them has as they are striving for excellence.

**Conclusion**

I feel confident that the sport psychology side of the program has prepared me well to use mental skills training and mindfulness with athletes. I also feel that the counseling side of the program has helped me refine my theoretical orientation over the last few years and I am aware that as I grow as a consultant my TOPE might well go through further refinement and changes. The focus of the program as a whole on ethical and culturally sensitive delivery of my services will help me to remain vigilant of potential issues that might arise in the future. I am looking forward to being a part of the growth of the profession of sport and performance consulting. I am looking forward to sharing what I have learnt with athletes and coaches alike and I am also looking forward to starting to educate other physical rehabilitation specialists in how to incorporate mental and psychological skills into their practice.

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