



Sport Psychology for Regional

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Abstract: In this paper we describe how we have provided sport psychology to pre-elite adolescent athletes who live in the New England and North West Region of New South Wales. Providing sport psychology to regional, rural, and remote athletes is more challenging than it initially appears. It involves more than simply confronting the tyranny of distance that these athletes and their coaches and families face. The dilemma is how to make sport psychology relevant and accessible to athletes who live in or near small country towns that are a world away from State and National Sports Institutes and the sporting facilities that were built for Olympic and Commonwealth Games. Simply rolling out programs developed for city-based athletes fails to consider the psychological, social, economic, and political issues that confront young people who are growing up in regional, rural, and remote Australia. This short-changes these athletes. Instead providing sport psychology for this athlete population involves conceptual, technical, and service delivery innovation. A central feature of our redevelopment of sport psychology has been to construct it as low-cost, low-tech, and locally available mental equipment. We have developed the NIAS Mental Equipment Packs that contain small inexpensive objects as communication, concentration, motivation, emotional control, approach behaviours, and relaxation equipment that can be taken to competition and to training. The Sport Psychologist's Handbook (Dosil, 2006) continues a strong tradition of adapting psychological skills training and performance enhancement services for different populations. You can trace the origins of this tradition back to Robin Vealey's seminal work, *Future Directions in Psychological Skills Training* (Vealey, 1988). However one population that has been overlooked in these developments has been pre-elite adolescent athletes who live in regional, rural, and remote areas. This is surprising given the success of country athletes in Australian elite sport (Abernethy, 2005), and the high regard that top coaches hold for country athletes (e.g., Bennett, 2002; Buchanan, 2007; Charlesworth, 2001). However this is not a uniquely Australian phenomenon. Côté, Macdonald, Baker, and Abernethy (2006) point to the disproportionate success rate of US and Canadian athletes coming from regional and rural backgrounds. We have been providing sport psychology services to pre-elite adolescent athletes living in the vast New England and North West Region of New South Wales since January 2000. After working on this project for 8 years we feel qualified to comment on some issues in providing sport psychology to this athlete population. We argue that relevance is the key issue in providing sport psychology to regional, rural, and remote athletes. But relevance is not immediately recognised as the central issue by sport psychologists and administrators because geography and physical distance are the omnipresent features of working with country athletes. But focusing on where an athlete lives inadvertently reduces this task to a service delivery concern. It frames providing sport psychology to country athletes simply as confronting the tyranny of distance that they face in accessing specialist sport services, and so interventions are designed principally to overcome this constraint. We argue that providing sport psychology to athletes living in the country must be framed more broadly if sport psychology interventions are to be cost-effective. Furthermore, we argue that any substantial development of sport psychology for regional, rural, and remote pre-elite adolescent athletes requires conceptual, technical, and service delivery innovation.

In our experience the key question is; how do you make sport psychology relevant to pre-elite adolescent athletes living in regional, rural, and remote locations. We argue that asking; how do I make sport psychology accessible to regional, rural, and remote athletes is an incomplete approach because it deals with only one component of servicing this athlete population.

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¹ See Annis-Brown, Ansell, Christensen, and Woodward (2007) for a description of our work with Northern Inland Academy of Sport (NIAS) scholarship athletes.

Our First Effort

From 2000-2002 we provided a basic sport psychology program to NIAS athletes in an orthodox manner. This was designed via three actions. Firstly, the topics, skills, and methods used in the program were selected from what the Australian and international sport psychology literature recommended for talented adolescent athletes. Secondly, the service delivery system adopted mirrored the model that the New South Wales Institute of Sport used to deliver services to pre-elite athletes holding NSWIS scholarships. Thirdly, the NIAS coaches were asked about the topics and mental skills that they believed were important for their sport, and that would enhance the development of the athletes in their squads. So the initial NIAS sport psychology program involved orthodox psychological skills training, customised for the sport, age, and nature of the group (e.g., single sex sports such as rugby union vs. male and female sports such as field hockey) that were delivered in group presentations at weekend training camps.

So a sport psychologist would leave Toowoomba² at 4am and drive to a weekend training camp in Armidale or Tamworth to arrive before 9am. He would deliver a sport psychology presentation to athletes at a typically non-productive training time³, and then be available to talk with athletes and coaches at other times during the training camp. The sport psychologist was available for individual consultations via telephone and email⁴.

This was well received by coaches and athletes. But notwithstanding the positive evaluations and feedback, we were concerned about whether there was a better approach for this athlete population. We wondered how much sport psychology penetrated into an athlete's training and competition and wondered how fatigue and other factors impacted on athletes taking up mental skills. For instance, athletes would travel between 30 minutes and 4 hours to attend the camp, be involved in training during the weekend, and then travel the same distance and for a similar duration to return home. We wondered whether one sport psychology session during this physically demanding training camp would be sufficient to help athletes to implement new behavioural routines into their sport. Secondly, we felt an underlying tension with the NIAS coaches as they tried to fit sport science training (e.g., sport psychology, nutrition, and medicine presentations) into their busy camp programs without cutting into physical training, physiological testing, and game-development and other sport specific activities. Prompted by these concerns, we began working on an alternative way of providing basic sport psychology to NIAS athletes in late 2002.

Our Second Effort

The centre-piece of a new approach was decentralising the service delivery so that sport psychology, and other sport sciences, would be presented in the country town in or near where the athlete lived. This was the starting point for building a revised sport psychology program for NIAS athletes, and their coaches, families, friends, and local communities.

Three factors influenced how we built this program. Firstly, Adrian Schonfeld completed his 30-month sport psychology NIAS internship and took a position at the Australian Institute of Sport⁵. Schonfeld's move was a catalyst for change since we needed to recruit a new consultant for the program. Secondly, we wanted to increase the efficacy of the program and move beyond educating to implementing mental skills. While the costs to deliver a centralised, camps-based sport psychology program were modest, we did not feel that this approach gave the athletes the best chance of putting psychological skills and knowledge into action. Thirdly, we wanted to resolve an underlying uneasiness that while we believed we were doing good work, it was in some way ill-matched for the needs of pre-elite adolescent athletes living in the country.

Our thinking was purposeful but not ordered, linear, and structured in late 2002. We were aware of what we wanted to achieve but there were no models available to guide how we would redevelop sport psychology for this athlete population. But the upside of this was that we were not constrained by past conventions in developing performance enhancement interventions.

On reflection, we understand that we were juggling many different issues in redesigning sport psychology for this athlete population. By not privileging physical distance and service delivery as the dominant concerns, we made this a more complex problem. But by being unconstrained by the literature we were free to be more imaginative and innovative in solving this problem. We now understand that this complexity came from the nature rather than just the number of issues that we were juggling. That is, we were concurrently juggling conceptual issues, technical concerns, and service delivery considerations in trying to redevelop sport psychology for pre-elite adolescent athletes living in inland NSW.

Table 1 lists some of the concerns that we faced as we moved from a familiar orthodox psychological skills training program to an unknown alternative approach. That is, an approach where sport psychology would be relevant and accessible to pre-elite adolescent athletes living in regional, rural, and remote NSW. We provide a more detailed description about how we dealt with these concerns and constructed sport psychology as mental equipment in an earlier work (see Christensen,

Lamont-Mills, & Annis-Brown, 2007c).

² No psychologist with specialist training in sport psychology worked in the NE/NW Region of NSW. As a result, NIAS approached the first author for his assistance in mid-1999.

³ Talks were usually scheduled after lunch or after dinner.

⁴ Adrian Schonfeld provided these services as part of his postgraduate studies under Steven Christensen's supervision.

⁵ Winning the competitive AIS Postgraduate Scholarship in Sport Psychology Award signals the strength and quality of Adrian's sport psychology work with NIAS from 2000-2002.

A feature of our revised work was to construct a new identity for sport psychology as mental equipment. We then used this identity to develop the NIAS Mental Equipment Packs and so present mental equipment as concrete, relevant, and accessible to NIAS athletes.

The NIAS Mental Equipment Pack contains several small and inexpensive items that can be readily bought in country towns in inland NSW, and then assembled in to a small transparent sandwich bag. These items were selected because they were locally available in the small towns where NIAS athletes lived. We linked each item to a conventional mental skill, and displayed this to athletes via a demonstration, a learning activity, and a short narrative describing how other adolescent athletes had used this item to practice a mental skill or adopt a particular psychological state in their competition or training. Table 2 displays how we matched conventional psychological skills and mental equipment items together.

We then revised the sport psychology presentation so that it complimented this mental equipment approach. These sport psychology talks became interactive events featuring practical, fun learning activities. Secondly, we invited NIAS athletes and their coaches, parents, family and friends to attend these talks that were held on a mid-week evening at a community centre in, or near, to an athlete's home-town.

We decentralised the program not simply because we wanted to minimise some of the travelling that country athletes and their families faced. Moreover, we wanted to involve an athlete's coaches, teachers, family, and friends in these talks. We felt that a family-based approach may help athletes to implement these new behavioural routines in their sport. Additionally, we hoped that athletes might adapt some of these new behavioural routines to school, work, family, and social activities if they were encouraged to do so by others in their local community.

The sport psychology talks began with the question, what mental equipment do you take to competition and

training? Thereafter the presenter would take answers to this question, distinguish between items of physical and mental equipment for sport, and distribute the Mental Equipment Packs and begin the learning activities.

A consequence of this approach was that the audience at the town-based sport psychology talks became more diverse. The earlier camps-based presentations were designed for an audience that shared a similar sport, age, and cultural backgrounds. However these new talks involved a broader audience of people with different sports, ages, roles, jobs, and educational backgrounds. Furthermore, we adopted the ambitious goal of making these sport psychology presentations meaningful to everyone who attended. Both features further added to the complexity of redesigning sport psychology for country athletes and their families and communities.

Our Critical Comments

We would like to contribute some critical comments about our work and some issues in servicing pre-elite adolescent athletes living in the country.

Firstly, we confess to knowing what we wanted to achieve but not knowing how we were going to do it. We wanted to stop squeezing sport psychology into gaps in the busy weekend training camps. Secondly, we wanted NIAS athletes to have a positive experience with sport psychology.

During the planning stage we realised that it was incongruent to take sport psychology to a small country town and yet present it in an orthodox big-city way. That is, displaying sport psychology as an intangible, mentalist and largely abstract set of skills, knowledge, and behavioural practices. In effect, such a talk might be presented in a local town hall but the ideas and practices were still foreign to many regional, rural, and remote athletes and families. We realised that making sport psychology accessible involved more than just making it mobile. It also needed to become relevant. Thus it seemed inappropriate to be rolling out a form of sport psychology that failed to consider the social, economic, political, psychological issues that confront young people who were growing up in regional, rural, and remote Australia. The dilemma was how to make sport psychology relevant and accessible to athletes who live in or near country towns that are a world away from State and National Sports Institutes and those international standard sporting facilities that were built for Olympic and Commonwealth Games. Secondly, we realised that without conceptual and technical reforms then our travelling sport psychology would be implicitly reinforcing and reproducing the country-sport cringe. That is, we would be inadvertently referencing those aspects of city-based sport that were 'superior' to sport in the country, and

not balancing matters by referencing those features that contributed to the success of country athletes in Australian elite sport. We used the local, low-tech, and low-cost character of the NIAS Mental Equipment Packs as leverage to remind NIAS athletes and their families that the basis of athletic success was effort, determination, and family and community support.

Finally, we were fortunate to have support from the NIAS Executive Director. Peter Annis-Brown, the third author of this paper, who understood these issues. Peter was a former talented athlete who grew up in Boomi, a small town 100 kilometres from Moree, and so he knew first-hand the difficulties that young country athletes faced. He remembered the 14 hour car trips to Sydney that he and his friends took most weekends during the athletics season. So as the NIAS Executive Director, he was in a position to authorise us to privilege efficacy over costs in redeveloping sport psychology for NIAS athletes and their families living in inland NSW6.

Conclusion

Sport psychology has a tradition of adapting mental skills training and performance enhancement services for different populations. However one population that has been overlooked in these developments has been pre-elite adolescent athletes who live in regional, rural, and remote areas. In this paper we describe how we have developed two sport psychology programs for NIAS athletes living in the New England and North West Region of NSW. Furthermore, we describe how the tradition of modifying established psychological skills training programs with some surface features of the athlete population produces an ill-matched approach for servicing pre-elite adolescent athletes living in regional, rural, and remote locations.

Instead we argue that providing sport psychology for regional, rural, and remote athletes should be framed more broadly, and not be reduced to solving the tyranny of distance. Furthermore we argue that any substantial development of sport psychology for regional, rural, and remote pre-elite adolescent athletes requires conceptual, technical, and service delivery innovation.

We have learned that relevance rather than access is the key issue in providing sport psychology to pre-elite adolescent athletes living in regional, rural, and remote locations. Simply focusing on where an athlete lives inadvertently reduces this to a service delivery issue, which can be solved by presenting sport psychology in cost-effective form (e.g., cds, websites, fly-in/fly-out presentations by institute-based sport psychologists). This form of high-tech, high-cost, and imported sport psychology contrasts sharply with the NIAS Mental Equipment Packs. We were fortunate that our work in recent years has been unconstrained by models and

recommendations in the sport psychology literature. This has allowed us to broaden the scope and complexity of the problem, and drawing up our experiences living in regional and rural communities and our imaginations to establish this sport psychology innovation.

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