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Consulting with Olympic Track and Field Hopefuls: It can't be this easy ... or could it?

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ABSTRACT

The present paper describes work conducted over the past year with two track and field athletes competing in the four hundred meter hurdle event. The article will focus on the athletes and will move between their differing environments and concerns to reveal two different approaches to applying sport psychology interventions. As Schinke (2004) has noted, the ability to learn through shared experience is an invaluable tool. It is hoped that this paper will reveal how two different environments and outlooks can determine the choice of intervention.

Introduction

The four hundred meter hurdles could be considered one of the most gruelling sprint events in track and field. It combines the sheer power of the four hundred meter sprint with the technical intricacies that the hurdles demand. This is coupled by the fact that the hundred meter hurdler should be proficient using both legs to hurdle as well as the flexibility to deal with differing stride patterns which is dependant on rhythm and coordination as well as the conditions. As both participants noted you need to really embrace pain to be able to be good at the hundred meter hurdle discipline. When I probed deeper it was interesting to note that, again, they both had simiar answers. The consensus was that you encountered pain due to the physical requirements of the event as well as the mental pain of never really being able to master the technique. This is supported by a comment from one of the participants, "I am always chasing perfection and once I think I have gotten there, poof, it vanishes and I have to start again." Many track and field

disciplines allow an athlete to develop a very competently stable technical model. However, for the hundred meter hurdler, once the technique has been solidified based on a certain stride pattern it is likely that the technique will again have to change once the stride pattern has been changed to increase performance. When you consider that this race also offers a lot in terms of tactics it is truly a painful event.

Setting The Stage

The first athlete is a mature female athlete who is looking at her last chance to make the Olympics in Beijing. In contrast, the second athlete is a young male athlete who is trying to squeeze onto the Beijing team but is more likely a candidate for the London Olympics. Both are student athletes on university scholarships. Contact was made due to the fact that I was the head track and field coach. It should be noted that I do not offer sport psychology skills to those athletes who train with me. Both of these athletes did not train with the university team (preferring to train with their national team coaches). They did represent the university and would stop by to do basic conditioning with the university team to develop team cohesion. In both cases they came to my office and asked if I would be able to offer them sport psychology services. I went through the ethical considerations and told them that I would not be able to offer them training advice if I was to take this role (Brewer, 2000). The initial meetings focused around what services I could offer as well as developing the relationship.

Initial Meeting

While the general structure for the initial meeting was typical, the content of the meeting was quite different than most encounters I have had. In both cases the athletes had been taught sport psychology skills for a number of years. For the sake of anonymity, I will call the female athlete Susan and the male athlete Tom. Susan had used the psychological skills for a while and knew which context to use the skills for. On the other hand, Tom had been taught the skills but still didn't feel too confident with regards to when to use the skills. Another unique aspect of both athletes was that they were in sport degree programs and had been learning about sport psychology from an academic point of view. Maybe because of their familiarity with sport psychologist and techniques both athletes moved fairly quickly to what they wanted out of the relationship. Finally, making an Olympic team is a very hard process but both athletes seemed very comfortable with where they were at and had very realistic ideas about their chances. This was quite different in comparison to past athletes who I have worked with who have been focusing on going to the Olympics. Cognitive Behavioural Intervention (holistic approach)

Susan was well trained in sport psychology techniques having been part of the national team program for many years. She felt reasonably competent in using these skills. However, her everyday life was a constant concern. She was not a funded athlete though her training times could put her in contention for funding. Susan is a student, a mother and an athlete who knows that this is her last chance to make the team and go to the Olympics. She is in the top 10 hurdlers in the country and at her best is near Olympic qualifying times. Recently, she has had some knee problems and quite possibly needs a minor operation to remove some torn cartilage.

The framework that I used throughout most of our sessions was that of perspective. Brown et al. (2001) found that there are 3 building blocks that seem to make up the concept of perspective. The first part of perspective is classified as identity. Athletes understand that they have many roles and that no one role takes precedence over another. The concept of self-acceptance also allows the athlete to deal with how one of the identities many have to take a lead at times. The second part is support and understanding where the support is coming from. The quality of an athlete's relationships is very important and investing time in these relationships only strengthens the support component. The final part is values and how their values impact their experiences. Values can be at the core of dealing with adversity. Our sessions revolved around management and perspective.

Shaun (SG): Hi Susan, how are you doing today? (She looks better than she did when she announced her injury and impending operation: though not her cheerful self). Susan (S): I am doing well. Knowing that this is going to be sorted is nice but I am a little worried about after. I also have to deal with my kids and they are so active. I am not sure that they are going to let me heal properly.

SG: This could be a good time to give them the power. Let them take care of you. They seem very helpful.

S: Yah they are! Actually this might be a good thing for them.

SG: Another benefit is that they are going to see a lot more of you so you will be able to connect with them more fully.

Susan had been worrying about her ability to properly parent her children as she was training so often. She realized that she needed to have her identities defined and that she needed to allocate time for each one of them but she was still feeling guilty at times with regards to her parenting time. Consequentially, she was anxious about her injury and by refocusing on an area of her life that she could take control of I hoped that she would be able to deal with her injury in a more positive light. Another benefit of the suggestion that her children could help her was to allow her to realize that she had support in dealing with her injury.

S: Yah I guess there is a silver lining in everything. I will be able to spend time with my children and work through the sport psychology techniques you taught me to use during my race. No wasted effort!! Is that good perspective?

SG: I you have it! Perspective: developing your identity, realizing your support and appreciating your values. Good work.

The rest of the sessions were used to monitor her injury and rehabilitation. Susan did not seem to go through the grief response phase of her injury. This could quite possibly be because the injury had not been that traumatic. She was already using problem focused coping skills and seemed fairly confident in her ability to rehabilitate while at the same time she was aware that at her age any injury requiring surgery could have long term consequences. I believe that the perspective framework that I taught her allowed her to positively deal with the mediating process that are connecting to injury response model quite successfully (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

Educational Intervention (performance approach)

Tom specifically asked about how to organize his psychological skills. He had heard of periodizing psychological skills but was not sure exactly how to go about it. I have a different outlook with regards to periodizing psychological skills. Many academics and applied sport psychologist have looked at the periodization of psychological skills as a ordering of skills based on how to logically learn the skills (Holliday, 2006; Hammermeister & VonGuenther, 2007). In contrast, a group of studies examined the effects of the year long training plan on the psychology of both elite and sub-elite track and field athletes found that each phase of training generated specific psychological themes (Galloway, 2006a; 2006b). It was suggested that these themes would form the organization of mental skills and not the logical ordering of learning the skills. This differs from the usual periodization of psychology examination in that these studies followed what was happening due to the training environment of elite track and field athletes. Preliminary findings revealed the following for the elite sample: ·

- During the preparatory phase, athletes used strategies to deal with the monotony of high volume training. ·
- The specialized phase, resulted in the ability to disassociate during high level / high lactate training. ·
- The competition phase was represented by the athletes' abilities to refocus after mistakes through the use of various psychological skills. ·
- The regeneration phase was typified by the inability to relax due to the feeling of competitors pass them

In comparison the sub-elite athletes presented a slightly different profile: ·

- During the preparatory phase, athletes had to deal with the excitement followed by the monotony of high volume training. ·
- The specialized phase, resulted in the ability to disassociate during high level / high lactate training. ·
- The competition phase was represented by the athletes' abilities to deal with emotional sways during competition. ·
- The regeneration phase was typified by the inability to relax due to wanting to work on their technique.

Using a similar format, I went through Toms experiences during each of the phases of training. He exhibited a similar response to the elite group during all the phases. The exception being that during the regeneration phase he was more concerned on developing technique rather than letting competitors pass him. During the time of this paper Tom was in the specialized phase and had strategies in place to deal with overcoming the mental and physical pain due to the high lactic levels. Nevertheless, I suggested that he also incorporate progressive muscle relaxation to help with the regeneration both mentally (due to the meditative component) and physically (due the slight removal of lactic during the contraction / relaxation). At first, he didn't know if the cost in time was worth the results. Fortunately, he knew that: a) he should keep with a program 4-6 weeks to see results and to overcome the 'comfort zone' and b) to make slight changes if results are not forth coming. Tom increased the number of contractions per muscle group from 2 to 4 and

added an auto suggestion tape using his own voice. Both of these changes gave Tom the results that he wanted.

Knowing the event is, to some extent, a very important starting point. Though I am a coach I have not been trained at the highest level to coach the 400m hurdles. So I did some homework and was able to prompt Tom with a series of key areas to see if these areas posed a problem for him. I narrowed the race down to a number of key statements and allowed him to talk me through them. These are the ones that he pointed out as key to his racing performance.

'Start to the first hurdle'

Tom (T): It is essential to make it to the first hurdle without a stutter. This first hurdle will almost always set the rhythm for the entire race.

'Movement over the hurdles'

T: For me, I do not have to lean as far forward as I did when I was doing the 110m hurdles (as I am a tall hurdler) and while the lead leg should still attack the hurdle there is not as much emphasis on having a very active trail leg. The trail leg should still drive forward but the touch down doesn't need to be a pronounced.

'On the curve'

T: Typically I want to take the hurdles in the curve with my left leg but on the other hand my coach and myself are trying to develop a more consistent stride pattern, rather than the odd number of strides that generally am using.

'3/4 of the race'

T: The lactic acid that is built up at this stage is massive. I feel like my legs are going to blow up. However, once I successfully clear the first hurdle on the back straight the burn goes away (at least from the front on my mind) and I am able to get it done.

'After the last hurdle'

T: I am thoroughly spent by this point but I know that this is the stage at which most races are won or lost. I have to relax and use my height and power to rocket me through the final length of the race.

After we had addressed these key areas we put a competition focus plan incorporating self-talk together. This program was developed using the work completed by Orlick (1986). The use of 'sequential check points' proved very useful for Tom. We had decided to develop both a visual diagram as well as key words to be used in a self-talk intervention (as can be seen in the figure 1. below). We came up with a number of self-talk words and after trial and error we decided that Tom would use 4 words out of the + generated. The first self talk word he used was BOOM. This

was a reminder to get out of the blocks strong. It also seemed to help him attack the first hurdle strongly. The next word used was after clearing the first hurdle. Tom had music that he felt synchronized his stride pattern. I did not get into the fact that he had differing stride patterns through the middle part of his race and that I would think he would then need different tempo songs to help with the stride pattern. He said that by using the word rhythm he could change the tempo of the song he listened to. His third word allowed him to overcome the impending pain of the 6th or 7th hurdle by embracing it and knowing that he had run his race until this point. Through a diary Tom found that he seemed to pass through the pain much more easily and in fact looked forward to this part of the race. The final self-talk word gave Tom the cue that if he relaxed he could use the power and technical advantages that he had to power him through to the finish.

Something that struck me as interesting was that Tom seemed to focus on his technique during our sessions, however, the words chosen were not technical in nature they were emotional or motivational. I made it a point to further explore this difference in the future. As of now Tom feels that he has more consistent results and our sessions to date.

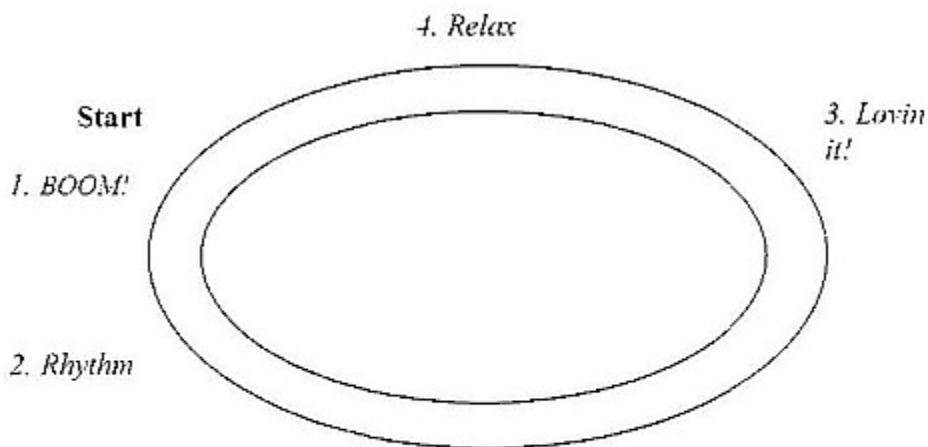


Figure 1. Positioning of key self-talk words

Conclusion

On reflection, working with both of these athletes was quite unlike past consultation with Olympic hopeful athletes. I found that learning about the event allowed me to develop a very specific intervention, which the client believed was very useful. I had known that the theoretical basis of perspective is very powerful but did not know how it would affect the injury process. Studying the theory related to stress and coping perspective seems to be a possible solution to bypassing many of the negative aspects of the healing process. Despite gender and age difference they shared a lot of similarities with regards to how they went about using the information that I gave them. I have to think that this is due to their education in sport science and more particularly in sport psychology. This does pose an interesting area of future study, “How long does it take to develop competent sport psychology skills in athletes?” Another interesting question would to

examine would focus around, “How important is the educational process relating to sport psychology skills?” Susan had been using the skills for 10 years + while Tom had only been using them for 3 years. To me it was truly amazing how smooth and interactive the sessions were. In most cases, when I reflect back on the sessions I have completed with athletes (and especially athletes in high stress / competitive situations) I have made mistakes or have questioned certain approaches. With both clients the sessions were smooth and athlete lead, I was merely a guide or sounding board.

Summary

Preparation for the Olympics is a massive undertaking and for track and field sport psychology has an important place in that preparation. Moreover, for Tom and Susan it is possible that their past experience with sport psychologist as well as an educational base learnt through University had left them with all the options to use the skills and advice given in a generative way to produce the results that they hoped for. Hopefully, the experience that I have shared with you will be able to give some insight to working with Olympic track and field hopefuls.

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