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Sport psychology services to professional athletes: working through COVID-19

Fandom around the world yearns for sports entertainment. Much of the discussions within the recent flurry of sport and exercise psychology writings have been focused on the challenging experiences of potential Olympians during an Olympic year. Indeed, the 2020 Olympics is an entertainment event like few others across sport levels.

Within a previous editorial titled "Sport Psychology Services to High-Performance Athletes During Covid-19", our Co-Editors from the *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* invited several renowned experts from the international amateur sport community to join us in a dialog regarding how amateur athletes from various national teams experienced their journeys through COVID-19. The editorial revealed convergences, though also idiosyncrasies in how team training during the time of the pandemic has been undertaken within centralised programs. The recent Olympic editorial can be found at the following link: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2020.1754616>.

The *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* is committed to advancing open dialogs regarding all forms of sport and physical activity. The intention is to contribute to a healthier world, through better evidence-based theory to practice. The IJSEP continues to welcome all authors seeking to contribute to COVID-19 discussions to submit their scholarship, emphasising the impacts of the pandemic on sport and physical activity participants, as well as those who support them with psychological services.

Within this editorial, we have shifted our gaze to professional sport. Professional sport, unlike Olympic sport, is accessible to viewership every year. There are a vast number of professional team and individual sports that attract viewership, whilst inspiring populations within and across national boundaries. Akin to our recently aforementioned editorial, the current editorial is accessible to you for free. Our composition of authorship in this editorial is also diverse in sport representation. Given the large number of professional sports known within our global community, the current contributors were narrowed to experts with vast experience working in professional baseball (MLB – Charles Maher), golf (PGA, LPGA – Rich Gordin), basketball (NBPA – William Parham), cricket (Stewart Cotterill), soccer (NFA – Carsten Hvid Larsen), and one of our editors, who is actively involved in combat sport (boxing, mixed martial arts, kick boxing – Robert Schinke). These experts have collaborated to augment wider perspectives about professional sport athletes in a pandemic.

The contributors consider their recent and current approaches in active work with professional sport clients, following a sequence: (a) once professional sporting events stopped, (b) current approaches in their work with professional athletes, and (c) a brief, broader reflection. What we hope the reader will find is that both temporal stages and the final conclusion indicate growth opportunities for consultants and professional sport clients, alike. One of the contributors was recently in a multisport mental performance consultant video session, and a participant suggested that the current state of affairs in relation to elite athletes is being experienced primarily as a tragic loss. Such a narrative might tell part of how athletes regard the current moment in their careers, but it does not tell the full story, or for that matter, a

mentally healthy story of the opportunities and teachable moments before us. We draw on the structure directly above to inform the narrative of this editorial.

Emergence of the pandemic

During mid-March 2020, professional sports around the world were in preparation and performance scheduling. Sport as business took an immediate turn, with imminent closures and the inability for athletes, coaches, managers, and mental performance consultants to continue their onsite roles within their organisations. Our contributors were involved in developing (a) action plans to accomplish the closure of training settings; (b) communicating the delicate decision of closure to players and staff, who were well aware that their seasons were trending toward a stoppage; and (c) for those who were working in cities away from their families, providing clients with health and safety travel guidelines as they made arrangements to return to their home residences.

The ripple effect of an abrupt stoppage, or crisis transition, is known to leave athletes and coaches with psychological and emotional challenges. At a population level, where athletes are included, there are increased cases in domestic violence, suicide, and bigotry. One highly publicised challenge we understand is that each athlete is unique in her/his engagement with social isolation. Though challenges with social distancing have been encountered worldwide, much has been written in cultural sport psychology identifying variations in collective and individual approaches within and across cultures. Certain cultures and nationalities are formal in terms of socially accepted distance, where people other than close family naturally maintain extensive physical distance, such as six feet. There are also Hispanic and Latino cultures where social exchanges are encountered at a closer physical distance, where people are normally demonstrative through hugs and kisses with friends and colleagues, beyond family (Schinke, Hanrahan, & Catina, 2009). We cannot assume that even in a single Major League Baseball franchise, professional boxing management group, cricket, or soccer team, that all athletes have experienced the required transition to formal cultural distance in the same way. Some are more comfortable and some are ill at ease with social distancing.

Based on what we know from athlete identity research and practice, and our own practical exposures, high-performance athletes, amateur and professional alike, emphasise their athletic identities. Within professional sport, there are individual differences in terms of how much emphasis is placed on an athletic identity as compared to the number of identities that comprise one's personhood. Many of our clients have families and partners, and some have side businesses and enterprises. However, we do recognise that professional athletes derive gainful employment from their sporting activities. Consequently the emphasis on an athletic identity is often heavily weighted, perhaps disproportionately. Due to any athlete's long-term commitment to sport excellence at the highest level, some players rarely explore other roles and contexts and, as a result, suffer from identity foreclosure and an overly narrow, singular identity (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011), which is counter-productive during a pandemic due to social isolation.

The challenges that flow from an overly weighted athletic identity, then, can include increased possibilities of anxiety, depression, addictions, and other mental health concerns (Henriksen, Schinke, Moesch, McCann, Parham, Larsen & Terry, 2019). Exemplifying our point, between March 22 and April 14, the percentage of professional soccer players reporting symptoms of depression doubled. FIFPRO and affiliated national player associations surveyed 1602 professional soccer players in countries that had implemented drastic measures to contain the spread of the COVID-19 such as home-confinement. One thousand one hundred and thirty-four male players, with a mean age of 26, and 468 female players, with a mean age of 23, took part in

the survey. Twenty-two percent of women players and 13 percent of men players reported symptoms consistent with a diagnosis of depression. Eighteen percent of the women and 16 percent of the men reported symptoms consistent with a diagnosis of generalised anxiety (FIFPRO, 2020).

Just as there are identity challenges associated with a pandemic, like every other unforeseen transition, there exist possibilities for personal enrichment. A pause for thought, albeit, in this case a lengthier one than first might have been anticipated, is often assumed to be inertia in a motivated, goal-directed athlete. The holistic opportunities for growth abound in such moments. Time away from extensive and longstanding training commitments and travel afford professional athletes time to develop their personal identities, existing relationships, and explore a breadth of interests, beyond sport. The immediate pause was an opportunity to nourish relationships, whilst nourishing one's self.

Counterbalanced with the opportunity to reconnect has been for some, a recognition that their playing contracts in the short-term were in peril. For example, a boxer is compensated after each bout – no bouts, no income. With younger professionals who were less financially heeled, discussions related to financial constraints layered on a further dimension of stress. Several of the younger athletes with lesser contracts returned home and are presently residing with parents or extended family. There is a second group of athletes we identified that are presently living alone. These athletes are even more socially isolated than those surrounded by family members. Finally, athletes on the cusp of financial independence, with young families of their own, continue to struggle as they await loosened restrictions and the inevitable reconceptualisation of what professional training and subsequent sporting events will be like, with fewer fans in seats. Questions linger among athletes in terms of interruptions to existing career paths, and associated, their financial livelihood. These questions could apply more deeply to athletes residing in developing countries, where finances are perhaps, less available.

Current interventions

There is consensus among the authors that in order to work effectively with clients, we have needed to develop an organic approach. The logical question we all have asked the athletes is what exactly they are looking for in terms of support during this pandemic moment. Some initially were uncertain in terms of how to respond to such an open-ended approach, enveloped in an unfamiliar circumstance – COVID-19. These athletes now reside at home, they are not among their peers, and they do need to feel that they are trending positively in terms of their athletic careers. What follows are a few approaches we have integrated into our work; some sport specific, some holistic. These approaches have been undertaken through online means, such as the regular use of video platforms, and chat discussions and forums with individuals and teams.

Our work is founded on the premise that athletes will best relate to structured communication and contact. Athletes, akin to all high-performance career professionals, evolve based on logical short- and long-term plans. Their career pathways need to make sense, and each needs to flow logically toward outcomes that can be parlayed into improved, consistent performance and viability into the future. The accountability in terms of planning must rest with each athlete in terms of thoughts, emotions, and actions. When an athlete is invested in self-improvement, he/she will allocate and schedule regular times within each week to work on one's mental game. Rarely is there the time to reflect with the guidance of a mental performance consultant, perhaps in collaboration with a coaching staff member, to identify existing gaps, and derive short-term plans that will compliment existing strengths. Weekly scheduled small group discussions with key support staff members, followed by

individual sessions with key providers, will lead to advancement in player development. Hence, the immediate time at home can become treasured, not only in terms of what it offers personally and interpersonally but also in terms of unanticipated – newfound gains in sport-specific skills.

Underlying regular support is an opportunity for the mental performance consultant to forge a strengthened relationship with each athlete. During pre-season and in season, athletes are focused on securing their positions, the immediacy of performance, and collaborating with coaches and teammates. Proactive sport psychology work is often associated with player access – something that can become challenging and scarce in professional sport. Alternately, assigned tasks are often reactionary, based on immediate setbacks or struggles. During the current moment, there is time to become further acquainted with each athlete's uniqueness as a person, and then, in terms of how that person comes forth to training and competition. Reciprocally, the athlete has the time to learn about the mental performance consultant, in terms of discussions around values and where and how the athlete's gaps might coincide with the practitioner's skills. The work that ensues is then deepened through mutual understanding and a strengthened relationship, leading into the future and the anticipated return to play.

The specifics that underpin each mental performance consultant's work will vary depending on each athlete's needs and the path that is set toward valued progression(s). We have undertaken exercises focused on mindfulness, guided performance imagery, the re-setting of goals, revisiting of competition plans, affirmation exercises, and broader holistic life balance and values-related discussions. We have also engaged with groups of athletes, sometimes spanning sport organisations, where they are able to facilitate a sharing of their current experiences, and the recognition that they are not alone in their career challenges. Peers are undergoing similar challenges, which contributes to a recognition that each athlete is still among peers, just from a virtual distance.

The path forward

There is hidden inspiration in the words that athletes, coaching staff, and mental performance consultants have expressed since COVID-19. We find ourselves working in a positive direction, for the betterment of sport as part of life. Each author identified above plays a part in how performances are being played out. Performances on the field are most often the end product of active work and inspirations in a series of opportune moments. The most profound net gain has been the strengthening of existing relationships within the athletes' lives, in their personal and professional spheres. Mental performance consultants often affirm that these relationships serve as the basis of client engagement, contributing to sporting excellence. The current time is historical, perhaps in more ways than people have envisioned. We are curious of new ways to further human potential. The answers might be atypical based on how we previously went about our roles as mental performance consultants. Atypical approaches can be healthy and contributive to excellence, founded in ingenuity. We predict that the best in professional sport performance is yet to come, and much of that progress will be gleaned from the current pandemic moment, assuming time, for athletes and providers alike, is used wisely.

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