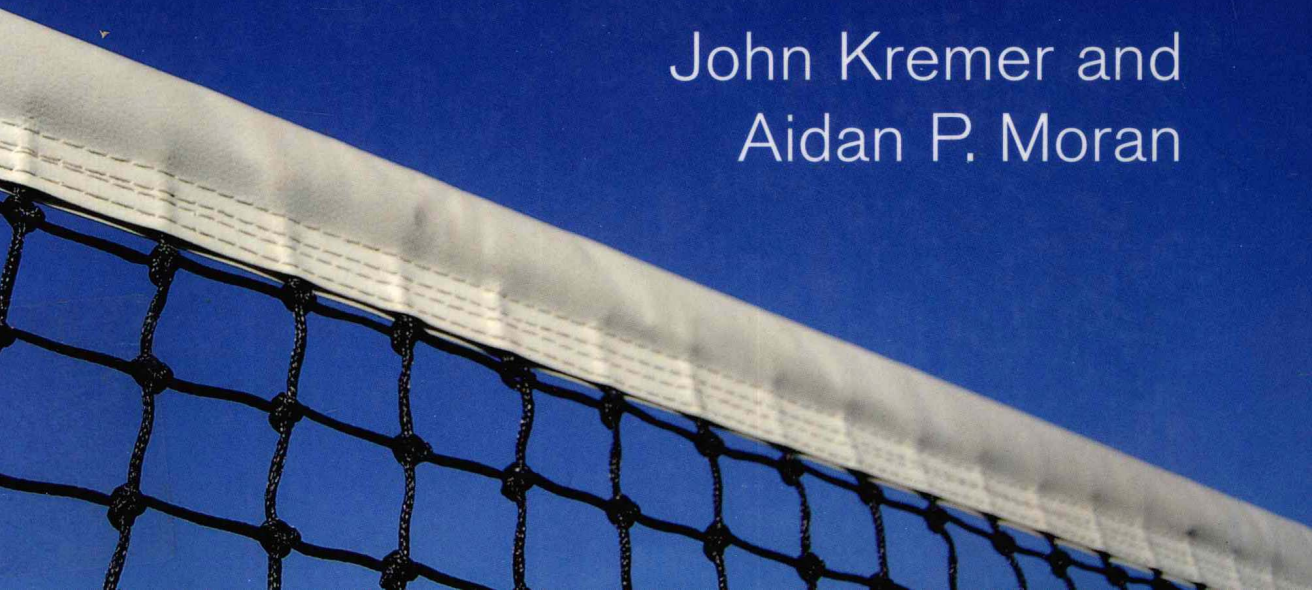


PURE SPORT

Practical Sport Psychology



John Kremer and
Aidan P. Moran



Pure Sport

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- John Kremer and Aidan P. Moran

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Dedication

To our families – thank you.

Foreword

'Think about it!'
'You're only as good as your last game.'
'Keep your eye on the ball.'
'No pain no gain.'
'Concentrate!'
'There's no "I" in team.'
'When the going gets tough, the tough get going.'
'Winning isn't everything – it's the only thing.'

As this collection of clichés reveals, sport psychology had already made its presence felt long before sport psychologists ever came on the scene. In fact, from the first time the human race ever chose to compete through the medium of sport, it is probable that the mental side to preparation and performance has played a significant if often haphazard and unregulated role. Sometimes this has been a positive influence, sometimes not – we can all recall those occasions when a few ill-chosen words, or personal negative thoughts, have taken their toll on performance, leaving us to ponder on what could have been rather than what was.

Our intention in *Pure Sport* is simple. It is to help you to explore what can be, or in other words your sporting

Foreword

potential, whether as a competitor, manager or coach. At the same time, in writing this book, we had no intention of simply adding to the burgeoning industry of applied sport psychology. Since the 1960s there has been a proliferation of practitioners, some good, some bad, backed by a library of books for those seeking to find that elusive winning edge.

That literature often serves a slightly different purpose from our own because our intention is to help you take charge, and for you to manage your own sport psychology; to direct but not to be directed. To achieve this goal we draw heavily on our lengthy and accumulated experience as both academics and practising sport psychologists, helping you to sift the wheat from the chaff and ultimately to bring together a coherent package of advice.

Too often in the past, sport psychologists have been hauled in to provide the snake oil or panacea for individual or team problems. Sadly, too often a vital ingredient has been left out of the recipe – you. We aim not to hog the limelight nor to bewilder you with science but to equip you with knowledge, insight and skills so that you can manage your own sport psychology, even to the point of recognising those occasions when it may be necessary to call on outside advice. In effect we aim to talk ourselves out of a job, but we are confident that the package of psychological skills will equip you to sustain a sporting career whatever may come your way.

Charting a path for the uninitiated through sport psychology has been a daunting task, and one, we must admit, we have avoided for far too long! In the past it has been easier to preach to the converted or those already working in or about to enter the discipline of sport psychology. In this book we have left that audience aside and focused our attention on those who can often be made to feel like outsiders but who have every right to be centre stage. We have enjoyed the challenge and we hope you enjoy the journey.

Finally, we'd like to acknowledge gratefully the help we received from Ms Julitta Clancy (indexer) and also from the Publications Scheme of the National University of Ireland.

John and Aidan

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Starting

Introduction

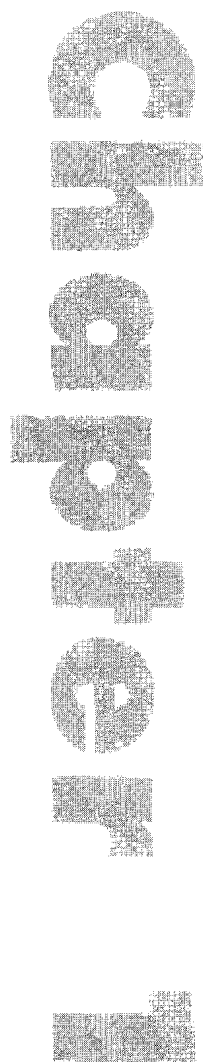
How a swing doctor and a mind reader bolster the home defence.¹

England need group therapy.²

SPORT PSYCHOLOGY IS NEVER far from the headlines. Whether reporting the preparation for golf's Ryder Cup, or the problems facing England's soccer manager, hardly a week seems to go by without some reference in the media to the role that sport psychology has played in individual or team performance.

It hasn't always been this way but, from humble beginnings, sport psychology has now developed into a high-profile, international enterprise, with very few elite sportspeople now likely to finish their careers without having crossed paths, or even swords, with a sport psychologist somewhere along the way.

Experiences with sport psychologists are likely to be many and varied, good and bad, with the absence of quality controls causing serious headaches for the professional organisations that are trying to bring some discipline to the



world of applied sport psychology. For example, headlines such as ‘Golf psychologist banned after scuffle’³ raise serious doubts about the ethical standards of certain people who work in this field. Make no mistake, the range of goods on offer is vast and the sort of work that is brought together under the umbrella of sport psychology can feel overwhelming, but there is no need to panic just yet.

One piece of advice to keep firmly in mind when approaching this field is to proceed with caution. Don’t be tempted to take on board all available advice uncritically, but filter selectively and be prepared to reject any material that appears hard to digest or unpalatable. In golf and many other sports, many a career has been damaged by the fruitless search for the elusive kernel of knowledge among the countless sport psychology books that clutter the shelves of most bookstores. In the same way that sports involving hi-tech equipment such as cycling can attract



Pelé (courtesy of Inpho Photography)

‘technofreaks’ (those who are constantly on the lookout for the latest piece of kit or equipment to lose an ounce or give them the edge), there is a real danger that a craving for ever more psychobabble can become another dangerous addiction that never quite leaves you.

And sometimes the advice you are given needs to be taken with a large pinch of salt! As a case in point, it is amusing to discover from Pelé’s autobiography that he was almost excluded from the Brazilian team that won the 1958 World Cup in Sweden on the basis of the rather odd advice given to the manager, Vicente Feola, by the team psychologist, Dr Joao Carvalhaes. Briefly, this advice suggested that Pelé was ‘infantile’ and lacked the necessary fighting spirit required for success. Fortunately, Feola had the wit to ignore this advice and proclaimed, ‘If Pelé’s knee is ready, he plays.’⁴ A similar example of psychobabble comes from a story told by Magnus Hedman, the former Glasgow Celtic goalkeeper.⁵ Apparently Hedman consulted a sport psychologist in the 1990s:

The first thing he asked me was what I would do if I found an intruder trying to break into my apartment – I told him I would attack the guy and kick him down the stairs. So he says to me ‘I want you to imagine the penalty area is your apartment and you have to kick out like that to protect your goal.’ I knew then he had never thought about referees and me getting sent off in every game I played for violent conduct. So, I decided I would handle my own problems after that.

Leaving psychobabble aside, our purpose in writing this book is simple. It is to pull away some of the mystery that can surround the topic and in the process make sport psychology more accessible to those who may not have a background in psychology but who do have an interest in the mental side of sport.

We are aware that we are entering a very crowded marketplace but, practising what we preach, we regard this as a challenge, not a threat. In delivering this material, we do not intend to overview the field in detail or to defend some of the practices that may have been dubiously peddled under the guise of sport psychology. Instead what we would like to do is pick out a well-signposted route map, to help you sort the good from the bad and the plain ugly and ultimately to equip you with the knowledge and the skills to use sport psychology to your advantage.

Who are we?

What can we bring to the party that others have not already provided? For one thing, over the years we have gathered together quite a few T-shirts. To be more precise, between the two of us, we have been fortunate enough to have accumulated

TABLE 1.1 Sports we have worked with

Aerobics	Golf	Outdoor bowls	Table tennis
Archery	Gymnastics	Paralympics	Tae kwon do
Athletics	Handball	Rowing	Tennis
Badminton	Hockey	Rugby League	Trampolining
Basketball	Horse racing	Rugby Union	Triathlon
Boxing	Hurling	Sailing	Volleyball
Camogie	Ice hockey	Shooting	Waterskiing
Canoe/kayak	Indoor bowls	Showjumping	Weightlifting
Cricket	Judo	Skiing	
Cycling	Karate	Snooker	
Dancing	Motorcycling	Soccer	
Darts	Motocross	Squash	
Fencing	Mountaineering	Surfing	
Gaelic football	Netball	Swimming	

well over 30 years of applied experience working in competitive sports both team and individual, amateur and professional (Table 1.1).

Along the way we have had the privilege of working with national and international athletes (including several world champions) and teams from a wide range of sports. Yes, we have made mistakes, and inevitably we have had our ups as well as our downs, but more than anything, working either together or separately, we have endeavoured to continue to learn about how theory can best be translated into sensible and workable practice.

Good theory, good practice

To our clients, the underlying theory will not always have been upfront, but rest assured, it will have informed our practice. We can make that statement with a degree of confidence because, in contrast to many applied sport psychologists, we have continued to pursue our applied work alongside our academic careers, lecturing and researching within university psychology departments.

We feel passionately that the interplay between these two careers, spanning the pure and the applied, has been invaluable in developing a critical awareness of the subject area and providing the ability to translate that knowledge into workable practice. For example, consider the age-old idea that there can be only one winner in sport – and that winning always takes place at someone else's expense. Well, if you subscribe to that theory, you may end up losing interest in your sport just because you suffer a few defeats in your competition against others. As it happens, many top-class athletes such as Tiger Woods have a rather different view of success.

Specifically, they define it not in terms of being better than others but by performing better than they themselves did before.

An underlying theme of this book is that, in the words of a famous psychologist called Kurt Lewin, there is nothing so practical as a good theory.⁶ We agree wholeheartedly, but at the same time there is nothing so useful for theory as the acid test of practice. Many of our previous publications focused on underlying academic and theoretical issues. Now is the time for us to redress the balance by writing specifically for non-specialists, and we hope to do so in a language that will not confuse and bewilder but may throw light on how you continue to ignore the mental side of your sport at your peril.

In so many sports the extraordinary advances in sport science over recent years have made it increasingly difficult to find that winning edge or X-factor to keep you one step ahead of the pack. Sport psychology is one frontier that remains to be fully explored, but it is not territory that should be frightening. With the right guides there are many established practices that can be adopted with confidence and that do not require a doctorate in psychology as a basis for exploration.

We aim to act as guides on this journey, hoping to inspire and to empower, but not to overpower with technical jargon or complicate what are often simple messages. We hope we succeed but ultimately we will leave that for you to judge.

Why Pure Sport?

At first glance this may seem a rather strange title for this book, but after long discussions we decided that these two words best capture our combined approach to applied sport psychology. That is, we do not set out to raise false expectations about the mysterious power of the mind. Instead our approach is purely to allow you to engage with sport itself, pure sport – unadulterated by hype or hysteria. At the end of the day, consistently playing your chosen sports to the best of your ability is what matters most. To achieve this goal, along the way it is vital that you have identified, harnessed and trained your mental skills to ensure that your physical capacity is what limits you, and not any excess psychological baggage.

When the proverbial boots have been hung on the nail for the very last time, a sportsperson should want to be able to reflect on a sporting career confident that the psychological did not stand in the way but acted in concert with the physical, the technical and the tactical in helping realise sporting potential – whatever that may turn out to be. No one dimension should ever be afforded pre-eminence; instead it is the synergy operating between them all that can help to maximise potential.

To enjoy pure sport more than anything we would ask you to travel with an open mind and with the optimism that you have the capacity to learn, to develop and to change. Too often, budding careers in sport have been thwarted because of an

ill-timed comment to the effect that the person does or does not ‘have it’. Once you apply the label (e.g. ‘he’s a natural’), it sticks and it can add an unnecessary burden, suggesting that the person can sit back and rely on his or her talent alone. But we should never forget that, as Gary Player once remarked, ‘You must work very hard to become a natural golfer!’⁷

In the Western world in particular, we have been shown to be far too quick to apply labels that can so easily impose arbitrary limits on potential. A study comparing the mathematical ability of Western and Asian children found that one simple factor helped explain why those from the East consistently outperformed those from the West. It wasn’t teaching techniques or investment in resources – it was that schools did not give credence to the idea that you are either good or bad at sums or numbers. Teachers in the East assumed that everyone had the potential to be good, and so the journey of discovery could be undertaken with optimism.⁸

As with mathematics, in relation to many of the psychological skills described in the book, all we ask for is an acceptance that many of these skills and techniques can be learned and can be developed, just as physical skills can be sharpened over time and with effort. Granted there will be limits to the potential for development or change, but surely it is better to travel hopefully and explore what those limits may be rather than passively accept the hand of fate.

Toughening up

Sport psychologists deal with a wide range of personal issues through their work but some topics seem to crop up time and again, including how to develop mental toughness. The resilience to cope with pressure and rebound from failure, allied with the determination to persist in the face of adversity, is one example among many of a psychological characteristic that should not be left to chance but can be nurtured. After all, most of us can’t claim to be born mentally tough – we become so by learning from our experiences – learning that focusing on what can be done *right now* (what we call ‘positive action’) is the key to overcoming any difficult problem, and we’ll explore this idea in greater detail later in the book.

Resilience to deal with the peaks and troughs of a sporting career can be taught so long as the right psychological ingredients are brought together, including a dose of realism. For example, the technofreak mentioned earlier may be someone who has not learned to accept personal responsibility for failure, or who clings to unrealistic expectations of success. To defend their fragile ego, such people constantly turn to external explanations as a form of protection. Through a tailored intervention, this self-defeating approach can be replaced with a more balanced acceptance of appropriate ways of explaining what happens – which then will help the person deal with successes and failures in a way that strengthens character and hardens resolve for future challenges.

Ultimately, mental toughness, along with so many psychological characteristics relating to sporting success, does not have to be the preserve of the fortunate few but can become the right of us all. Throughout the book we will bring together what we regard as the essential ingredients for success, but at the start of this journey all that we require is optimism, open-mindedness and a positive willingness to learn.

Change management

In many respects sport psychology is about change management. An old joke springs to mind.

*How many shrinks does it take to change a light bulb?
Just one – but the light bulb must really want to change.*

This sentiment resonates powerfully in the world of applied sport psychology where so often the best-laid plans fail because of individuals' unwillingness genuinely to engage with what is happening around them. This may be because of suspicion or more deep-seated personal psychological problems. Sadly it is often true that many of those who are most resistant to sport psychology are those who have the most to gain, and their resistance itself sometimes speaks volumes. Arrogance can be a thin veil disguising a lack of confidence or low self-esteem, but without a genuine willingness to engage, the enterprise is doomed to failure before it even begins.

At the other extreme are those whose resistance to change is entirely justified because they have already proved that they have what it takes to succeed at the highest level. From our experience, their number is not great, but in these cases there is nothing to be gained from disturbing a winning formula. As the saying goes, if it isn't broken, don't fix it. That said, it is a brave person who says they have nothing left to learn – even if it really is the case that they have nothing left to learn!

The word 'change' in the context we are using it here should not be interpreted as implying a root and branch cognitive restructuring. Such radical surgery is unnecessary and could prove to be dangerous and counter-productive. More often it is about rediscovering ingredients that were already there but may have been lost over time as a career has developed.

One of the most significant casualties can be the lightness that goes with pure enjoyment of an activity that may have become a job of work as a sporting career advances. Interestingly, the legendary basketball coach John Wooden (see Chapter 9) claimed that a crucial characteristic of successful sports teams is that they have players who not only work hard but *love what they do*.⁹ Later chapters