

A person in a dark football kit with white accents on the sleeves and shorts, wearing black socks and football boots, stands in the doorway of a yellow tent. They are holding a yellow and white football with both hands. The background is a bright green grass field. The scene is lit with warm, golden light, creating long shadows on the tent floor.

PSYCHOLOGY IN FOOTBALL

WORKING WITH ELITE AND PROFESSIONAL PLAYERS

MARK NESTI

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PSYCHOLOGY IN FOOTBALL

- How can the skills of the sport psychologist be put to best use within a football club?
- How can a sport psychologist help elite footballers perform at their maximum level?

In this groundbreaking guide to the role of the sport psychologist within elite and professional football, leading sport psychologist Mark Nesti argues that working closely with coaches and players to create a receptive environment is vital if psychologists are to add maximum value to team and individual performances.

Drawing on a decade's professional experience working at the top level of English football, Nesti offers a detailed guide to delivering sport psychology in an elite team sport environment, from practical drills on the training field to shaping organizational behaviour at club level. The book explores the full range of issues and themes that define the role of the professional sport psychologist working in football today, including:

- Mental skills training
- Group cohesion and team dynamics
- Counselling, trust and confidentiality
- Transitions in football
- Managerial and coaching philosophies
- Structure, communication and organizational psychology

The book is illustrated throughout with real-world case studies, drawing on research into sixteen professional clubs across five European countries, and concludes by suggesting how other elite team sports can learn from the experiences of professional football. This is the only book to outline a holistic approach to psychology in football and the only book to offer such a rich combination of theory and practice. It is therefore essential reading for all students of sport psychology and all psychologists and coaches working in elite team sport.

Mark Nesti is Reader in Sport Psychology at Liverpool John Moores University. He has worked as a consultant sport psychologist with four English Premier League football clubs, and is currently working with players and staff at three Premiership clubs.

FOREWORD

Sport psychology has not always been well received in the world of professional football. This might appear to be a surprising statement to make about one of the most high profile, intense and pressured sports on the global stage. Especially at Premier League levels the rewards for success and punishment for failure are arguably unlike anything else in our culture, with the possible exception of high level politics. Although at the highest levels of the game there is a far greater knowledge about the importance of the mental side to performing well, those wishing to offer a sports psychology service in professional football often face a considerable number of obstacles. Misunderstandings, unrealistic expectations, suspicions and doubt can be found on both sides. Many sport psychologists are reluctant to work in the sport, and there are those in the game who question the value of employing sport psychologists.

Mark Nesti is someone whose experience in this sport at the highest level makes him an ideal person to write about what it is like to deliver sport psychology in professional football. I met him almost ten years ago at a sport psychology conference on working with teams. If I remember correctly, his message was similar to much of what is in this book—psychological work with individuals is most effective when the sport psychologist engages with and understands the culture of the sport, club and the team. I thought that this hit the spot for me as a young and new sport psychologist in a Premiership club, where I was quickly finding out that mental skills training would be a very small part of my job, and that dealing with broader issues and managing the environment would be the key task.

This book is essentially about some of the reasons for this state of affairs. Although aimed at sport psychologists, students and those wishing to work in this field, this is not a one sided account which simplistically

blames clubs for their failure to embrace the discipline. But neither does this book have little to say to the clubs themselves. A major strength of what has been written is that Mark Nesti has attempted to get behind the difficulties facing psychologists and clubs in this area of work, and has identified a way forward that is both realistic and achievable. That he has been able to do this owes much to the extensive involvement that Mark has had delivering sport psychology support within a number of Premiership clubs and with professional football staff and players during the last 15 years.

Much of the written material that currently exists on sport psychology can be divided into self help type literature, or academic publications in research journals. Although both of these can be useful on occasion, the former often lacks depth and sounds like common sense, whilst the latter rarely seems to consider the broader culture within which the action should take place. An impressive feature of this text is that it includes reference to complex concepts and psychological theory that will challenge the reader, but provide a sometimes new and often richer account than exists in many other books addressing sport psychology. Equally important, consideration is given to the topics of environment and culture. Having worked in Premier League football for a decade I have discovered that developing and managing the culture, streamlining organisational processes and systems, and affecting policies and operational practices are crucial areas for the sport psychologist to influence. Although these tasks are often carried out by performance directors in some clubs, there is a role here for sport psychologists to take beyond the individual work on performance enhancement carried out with players and staff.

I hope that this book will help sport psychologists to prepare themselves to face up to the reality of delivering sport psychology in the wonderfully exciting but incredibly challenging world of professional football. For some, this may mean that they will have to learn new skills or even engage with unfamiliar ideas and theory. Clubs and the sport itself can also benefit from having a better understanding of what the sport psychologist can bring to the party - something that ultimately will be able to enhance the performance of both staff and players.

*Mike Forde
Director of Football Operations,
Chelsea FC,
May, 2010*

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This task felt at times like a challenge too far. Life seems to be getting so frantic for many of us in our unhealthy postmodern world that it is increasingly difficult to find periods of quiet and stillness to be able to think deeply about things, and maybe even write about them on occasion. The most important person who has helped me find the necessary time in the midst of all this bustle has been my wife, Sarah. Without her sacrifices and unswerving support this work would never have come to fruition.

In my professional role at Liverpool John Moores University I have been greatly helped by many colleagues, especially Drs Martin Eubank, Martin Littlewood and Dave Richardson, who have covered my tasks when I have been overrun, and whose knowledge about psychology, football and culture has contributed to ideas expressed in this book. Professor Tim Cable, Head of the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences at LJMU, has been remarkably supportive in facilitating my involvement in Premiership football. This is no easy or simple thing to do, particularly when universities, like other sectors, are operating in a difficult financial and economic climate.

I would also like to acknowledge the part played by Mike Forde, Director of Football Operations at Chelsea FC, Sam Allardyce, Manager of Blackburn Rovers, and Mark Taylor, Head of Sports Medicine and Sports Science at Fulham FC, in my development and understanding of the role that sport psychology can play in Premiership football. Many other individuals in the game during the past fifteen years have taught me much about performance, professional football culture and psychology; but these three people have made the biggest contribution to my knowledge and skills.

Lastly, I must convey my gratitude for the extremely patient help that I have received from Simon Whitmore and Joshua Wells at Routledge. I know the deadline extensions were a great help to me, but that it put you under increasing pressure. Without such flexibility I am sure this work would have been impossible to complete.

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INTRODUCTION

Increasing numbers of sport psychologists have been working in professional sport since the early 2000s. The particular demands and challenges faced by sport psychologists operating in team sport environments is something that has arguably not been adequately considered within the literature. Professional team sports cultures, such as those found in football, are entirely different from what is usually encountered in lower-level and amateur sporting environments.

Delivering sport psychology so as to be effective and welcomed is something the sport psychologist has always to face. Whilst there are many reasons for this, one may be closely related to the type of academic literature that has prevailed in the discipline thus far. It has been pointed out on numerous occasions that there is a lack of theoretical breadth in much of the research literature within sport psychology, and that mental skills training seems to have dominated approaches to applied practice until very recently. This situation has probably contributed to the problems encountered by sport psychologists working in professional sports like football. Mental skills such as imagery, self-talk, relaxation techniques and goal-setting are rarely sufficient. The scope of issues and environmental demands facing the sport psychologist working in professional football means that something else is required. Many successful practitioners faced with this dilemma have attempted to survive by pursuing other qualifications to complement their sport psychology knowledge, or have relied on previous experience and common sense to guide their approach. Although this is understandable, it does nothing to support arguments about the professionalization of sport psychology.

This book is aimed at upper-level undergraduate and postgraduate students, and at sport psychologists who wish to work within professional

football. It is also written for those many applied sport psychologists who are deeply dissatisfied with the discipline's over-reliance on mental skills training and research that often seems to ask more and more, about less and less. Since football is the most successful and wealthiest sport in the world, it would be surprising if greater opportunities for sport psychologists to work in the game did not continue to expand. However, there are already a significant number of sport psychologists working in professional football, usually in a part-time capacity, and most often at youth and academy levels. These individuals and others working in first-team settings frequently criticize the education and the training they received to help them succeed in their role. Many of these predominately young people and inexperienced psychologists are strongly critical of the continued dominance of the positivist research they encountered within their educational experiences. There is also negative comment about how inappropriate and ineffective psychological skills training can be especially at first team levels and with young professionals.

These courageous newly qualified sport psychologists and consultants are managing to maintain a critical perspective towards their role and the discipline of sport psychology. They usually acquired this skill and developed it throughout their earlier formal educational experiences, especially at university. Unfortunately, this approach is not always apparent within the university sector, where the US mantra of 'publish or perish' seems to be taking hold on this side of the Atlantic as well. This has been one of several key factors in narrowing the theoretical base and range of research topics evident within the academic journals within sport and exercise psychology. Ideally, this literature should provide a constant source of useful material for those working in the field to assimilate and translate into practice. It is argued here that this is not happening and, in fact, the situation may actually be worse now than two or more decades ago when there was a smaller community within sport psychology itself.

In some ways, it could be claimed that we have two distinct cultures. One is interested in pursuing research in to an ever decreasing number of topics, whilst the other ignores the findings from such work, and frequently operates in an atheoretical and practical way. If this situation occurred in medicine, education or other established professional areas

within the caring professions, there would be great concern. A quick glance at the contents page in many of our most important sport psychology journals suggests that we are still for the most part engaged in examining the efficacy of various mental skills techniques, and investigating factors associated with stress, competitive anxiety and motivation. That almost all of this work is derived from behavioural, cognitive and cognitive-behavioural approaches in psychology, or continues to rely on using self-report instruments to collect data, appears to be of little concern to some of those charged with helping the area to grow and become more ecologically valid.

There is little mention of mental skills training within this book. This is deliberate. The material used throughout is based on the author's experience of almost a decade of delivering sport psychology support within Premiership clubs and with professional footballers. Many of the ideas, concepts and information mentioned in the book have been gathered from several other sport psychologists who have previously been active within the game, or who still work in Premiership and elite professional football. This book, therefore, is primarily about practice. However, as would be expected in any description of professional practice, there are accounts of theory and relevant research to support descriptions and recommendations. This is not meant to be a comprehensive summary of all sport psychology research in football. Rather, the aim has been to address the task from the opposite angle. Following the requirements of phenomenology, data based on the experiences of those who are closest to the action, namely the players and their support staff and coaches, has provided the empirical evidence for this account. This has meant that new concepts such as existential anxiety, identity, values and spirit have been included, especially where they can help to explain the day-to-day experiences of the sport psychologist operating in elite professional football.

The psychological perspective that has been used most fully in this work is opposed to materialist, reductionist and natural science accounts of psychology. The work presented here is closest to humanistic and certain existential psychology approaches, and is based on a conceptualization of psychology as a human science (Giorgi 1970). This means that focus is on the person first and the athlete second. This, after all, is what Martens (1987) demanded of sport psychology over thirty years

ago. This point has also been supported by Corlett (1996a) and Ravizza (2002a). It is notable that the work of these three individuals focuses on the concept of person rather than the notion of individuals.

A person is considered to be mind, body and spirit and, as such, this and only this can claim to be a fully holistic perspective. Such a view of course demands that psychology does not restrict itself to the study of the isolated individual, but, instead, is prepared to examine people in their broader environment and culture. Because of this, existential psychology will be used to inform much of the work contained in this book. This is because of three main reasons. First, existential psychology is the approach most associated with phenomenology. Phenomenology demands that all research and applied work must start with the 'lived experiences' of the clients or subjects. In this way, phenomenology claims to be a strictly empirical approach. The second reason is that the roots of existentialism are European rather than North American. This includes the destructive self-centred and nihilistic relativism associated with Sartre (1958) and the more hopeful, optimistic and spiritual brand of Marcel (1948) and others. The important factor though as far as sport psychology is concerned is that it was historically the precursor to the humanistic psychology approach that is associated most usually with Maslow (1968). However, unlike humanistic psychology and so-called positive psychology, the existential view recognizes that both positive and negative events and experiences can ultimately benefit the growth and development of persons in sport and life in general. This perspective seems particularly well suited to the environment of elite professional football where players repeatedly experience incredibly positive and exciting moments alongside periods of great difficulty, that require sacrifice, responsibility and the making of difficult choices. Finally, existential psychology, in common with the psychoanalytic psychology espoused by psychology's first and arguably most important theorist, Sigmund Freud (1991) claims that anxiety is *the* most important psychological factor. Existential ideas are not merely restricted to competitive anxiety, but extend to consider anxiety in much broader terms. Again, it is important to note that this approach views normal anxiety as a potentially positive experience (Nesti 2007). Premiership football is riddled with the experience of anxiety. Similar to the ideas expressed by Corlett (1996a), this approach suggests that anxiety should

more often be confronted and used constructively to aid choices and accepting responsibility, rather than being managed away through mental skills techniques.

In conclusion, the theory, concepts and research that underpins the material contained in this book has been selected to help deepen understanding about the experiences of delivering sport psychology in elite and Premiership football. Issues like being dropped from the starting 11 despite being a mentally focused, appropriately motivated and highly experienced player are often not matters that can be dealt with through mental skills training or psychological techniques. Similarly, player-coach relationships, dealing with the demands of new cultures, seeking to move clubs, or attempting to deal with the threats of relegation and or of being sold, are some of the real issues faced by players over a typical season. Sport psychologists need psychological approaches and theory that will be 'up to the task' of dealing with such matters.

The book is ordered in such a way that the first chapters attempt to address some of the daily, weekly or season-long practical issues that the sport psychologist may have to deal with in a Premiership club or in elite professional football. The second part of the book focuses more on some of the broader considerations and conceptual issues that are always in the background when engaged in this type of work. For example, topics like values, confidentiality and the importance of the identity of the sport psychologist, the team, and the coaching staff is included. Much of this has received little recognition to date in the sport psychology literature dealing with elite professional sport.

Chapter 1 examines the unique culture of Premiership football and elite professional clubs. It is absolutely essential that the sport psychologist gains an understanding of this environment as quickly as possible. It is also vital to avoid the many and varied pitfalls existing in this culture, to develop a way of fitting into the environment and become a skilled reader of the conventions, traditions and practices in this type of world. This as a highly volatile, performance-focused and pressured environment, which places special demands on everyone who works in this milieu. Sport psychologists and their effectiveness will be under close scrutiny in this type of single-minded culture from day one.

Chapter 2 addresses more familiar territory for some sport psychologists.

Counselling is increasingly being used in sport psychology practice to ensure that athletes are able to discuss things that are most important to them, rather than learning to use psychological techniques that may fail to meet their needs. This chapter asks how an existential psychology counselling approach can provide a theoretical underpinning to one-to-one work with Premiership players and elite professional footballers.

Chapter 3 continues in a similar vein. Focus is on how the sport psychologist can support the coaching team and help with staff development. This role seems close to that of an organizational psychologist, and can involve writing staff job descriptions, facilitating development away days, and supporting continuing professional development for staff. Following on from this account, Chapter 4 deals with the type of one-to-one support that the sport psychologist can provide for the manager. Some of this task can also be effectively carried out by sport psychologists based at the club, part or full time, or through support from external consultants outside the football club. Where the sport psychologist has a great deal of contact with the manager and is immersed in the club, he or she may be able to work closely and confidentially with the manager to assist them in their role and future development.

Team-building, team cohesion and team spirit are considered essential at all levels of sport. Chapter 5 discusses what these terms mean by drawing on little-used concepts and theoretical accounts. Some of these are located within the parent discipline of psychology and may provide a new impetus to understanding and application within sport psychology. Chapter 6 continues with the theme of support by focusing on the role of the liaison officer. This individual, in many ways like the club chaplain, is often highly skilled at providing pastoral support where the focus is not explicitly on performance and the competitive process. This chapter considers how the liaison officer and sport psychologist can collaborate to best effect. The penultimate chapter investigates important ideas about confidentiality, trust and values. Within an elite professional sport environment, these terms will help the sport psychologist to guide their work in a professional and effective way. Chapter 7 also includes reference to team and individual identity. Existential and humanistic psychology perspectives have emphasized that identity and personal meaning are crucial elements in understanding how people, or groups, deal with success and failure. Although many in psychology